

Claremont Colleges

## Scholarship @ Claremont

---

CMC Senior Theses

CMC Student Scholarship

---

2022

### The Faces of War: Reintroducing Women's Narratives in War

Robin Makena Peterson  
*Claremont McKenna College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc\\_theses](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses)



Part of the [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [International Law Commons](#), and the [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Peterson, Robin Makena, "The Faces of War: Reintroducing Women's Narratives in War" (2022). *CMC Senior Theses*. 2989.  
[https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc\\_theses/2989](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/2989)

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you by Scholarship@Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in this collection by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact [scholarship@claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@claremont.edu).

Claremont McKenna College

The Faces of War:  
Reintroducing Women's Narratives in War

Submitted to  
Professor Jennifer Taw

By  
Robin Peterson

For  
Senior Thesis  
Spring 2022  
April 22, 2022

## Acknowledgments

Professor Taw, thank you for your endless support, guidance, and patience. I am so grateful for your encouragement to pursue a topic I care deeply about and for strengthening my passions for security studies. I could not have asked for a better thesis advisor.

I would also like to thank Alex Horton and her fellow CSTs for inspiring me to pursue a career in the U.S. Army. I am so grateful for your mentorship and for answering all my questions, at any time of the day.

To my fellow ROTC cadets and future officers, especially the women, you inspire me every day to be a better leader, friend, and overall human. Especially to Sonja, Halle, Cooper, and Lauryn—our friendship will forever be the best part of my college experience.

Thank you to my fellow year-long thesis writers, Michael, David, and Chase. You all pushed me to pursue and finish this endeavor. Dave, thank you for the extension edits. Mike, thank you for always pushing me to write even when I was not motivated. And finally, thank you Chase, for listening to me talk about Afghanistan and the women involved for the last year.

I am grateful for the lifetime of support and love provided by my family. To my dad for always rooting for me, no matter what, and to my mom for always persevering.

Lastly, to the thousands of women involved in the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan who served their country and continue to do so in the face of oppression and impossible circumstances. Your work and dedication will not be forgotten.

---

*“If we are to understand war fully, we need to understand not only what happens on the front lines, but what happens on the back lines as well, where women are in charge of keeping life going.” –Zainab Salbi*

---

# Table of Contents

<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b> .....	<b>I</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>IV</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: GENDERED NARRATIVES</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>CONFRONTING THE NARRATIVES: THE U.S.-LED WAR IN AFGHANISTAN</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>CONTEXT FOR THE U.S.-LED WAR IN AFGHANISTAN</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: SOLDIERS</b> .....	<b>35</b>
<b>AMERICAN SOLDIERS</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<i>Female Engagement Teams (FETs)</i> .....	<b>40</b>
<i>Cultural Support Teams (CSTs)</i> .....	<b>42</b>
<b>AFGHAN SOLDIERS</b> .....	<b>44</b>
<i>Latifa and Laliyuma Nabizada</i> .....	<b>46</b>
<i>Major Fatima Sadat</i> .....	<b>49</b>
<i>Female Tactical Platoon (FTP)</i> .....	<b>51</b>
<b>SEXUAL ASSAULT IN THE MILITARY</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>AFGHAN WARLORD</b> .....	<b>57</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: WOMEN INVOLVED BEYOND THE FIGHT</b> .....	<b>63</b>
<b>AMERICAN MOTHERS</b> .....	<b>63</b>
<i>Arin Yoon</i> .....	<b>64</b>
<i>Holly Hayden</i> .....	<b>66</b>
<b>AFGHAN MOTHERS</b> .....	<b>68</b>
<b>SEX WORK AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE</b> .....	<b>70</b>
<i>Zainab</i> .....	<b>72</b>
<i>Gender-based violence in Afghanistan</i> .....	<b>73</b>
<b>ACTIVISM</b> .....	<b>74</b>
<i>The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan</i> .....	<b>74</b>
<b>ART AND ARTISTS</b> .....	<b>80</b>
<i>Afghan Women’s Network (AWN)</i> .....	<b>84</b>
<i>Women for Women International</i> .....	<b>85</b>
<i>Farhat Popal</i> .....	<b>88</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>92</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>95</b>

## **Abstract**

Women take part in every war, but their accomplishments are mostly unacknowledged in the thousands of war stories told in the aftermath which tend to valorize men's contributions as political leaders and soldiers. This erasure of women's experience's and agency in war holds true for war in Afghanistan, as well. This thesis identifies the gendered narratives told in books, movies, television shows, and the media but then offers, in contrast, narratives of Afghan and American women's action during the forty years of war in Afghanistan. By sharing and contextualizing women's stories, this paper strikes a blow against women's erasure from war stories and takes a small step towards filling in the crucial gap in our understanding of war itself.

## **Introduction**

Women's perceived "role" in conflicts and war, as in society, is constructed through many generations' stories in which men are the main characters. In the majority of historical war stories, ranging from the Trojan Wars to the ancient African wars to the heroes and villains of WWI and WWII, men are central and women are peripheral if mentioned at all. Indeed, women are rarely the heroes and instead, when depicted, are victims or prostitutes, mothers, and nurses ministering to the men. The portrayal or, more often, exclusion, of women from heroic war stories furthers the established perception of what women should do and can be. Women's experiences during and after war are rarely told.

Military and political leadership in war has almost always been men; soldiers have almost always been men. And the (almost always male) historians and scholars who then tell stories about war focus on the men who are its organizers, fighters, heroes, and martyrs. All the while, women are affected by war in ways that go unacknowledged. War relies on women, but their stories and experiences are too often simplified as a supporting role for men. Across multiple cultures and time, women are on the margins, while men are depicted as heroic warriors. Ironically, in these narratives, women also are often depicted as in need of protection - wars are even fought in their names. Women's actual roles in upholding societies, however, and in maintaining economies and defending their own families and communities, often in the face of targeted attacks and systemic rape, are ignored. War narratives focus on men's courage, valor, violence and death, but not women's. Women show up aspirationally: the home-front for which men are fighting, the

virgin or mother who must be defended. Women's real stories in war are obscured, women's agency in war is erased, and women's contributions (good or evil) are overlooked.

These common assumptions about gender determine how we act, who we are, and the societal limitations imposed. When men are off at war, women take care of everything from children to gathering clean water for their communities.<sup>1</sup> Just as in peacetime, the work women do at home is undervalued and dismissed as not as important as a men's jobs, even if much of the work is just as, if not more, lifesaving. This dismissal creates the conditions in which women experience war and conflict, insofar as women are equated with child-like innocence, relegated to being homemakers (even female child soldiers are made to cook and wash while little boys are handed guns), forced into prostitution, and otherwise limited in their agency by societies' assumptions about their biology. Equally important, the women caught in the middle of a war, forced to flee from violence due to no fault of their own, are charged with caring for children while traveling or living as refugees. For example, when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, women had limited options but to take their children and elderly to safety because men aged 18-60 are prohibited from leaving.<sup>2</sup> As refugees in foreign countries, society and familial expectations prevent women from joining the fight in the same way men are required to. In war, as men leave to fight and "protect" women, women are left to deal with the fall-out of war—all the while caring for children, the sick,

---

<sup>1</sup> "Refugee Women and Girls Make the World a Healthier Place," accessed November 29, 2021, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/refugee-women-and-girls-make-the-world-a-healthier-place/>.

<sup>2</sup> Associated Press, "'Some Kind of Terrible Dream' for Ukrainian Women Refugees," *VOA*, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/some-kind-of-terrible-dream-for-ukrainian-women-refugees/6475086.html>.



the elderly, veterans and more. Beyond taking care of individuals, women keep society functioning by maintaining the economy, protecting their immediate security, and supporting community health.

In the case of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, millions of women were involved. There were heroes, martyrs, villains, and survivors. Male political and military leaders used women as a justification for war and a symbol of struggle, even as women remained mostly peripheral to planning and leadership; nonetheless, women found ways to escape the existing social constraints. The war in Afghanistan provides myriad opportunities to examine the failure of war narratives to capture women's authentic experiences, actions, and agency. For example, although Afghan women are depicted as defenseless within a religious patriarchy, this narrative ignores the roles and actions women took on at home, in their communities, and in combat. It reduces Afghan women to symbols without acknowledging their complex stories. Similarly, stories of foreign troops in Afghanistan generally focus on male soldiers' experiences; however, many women deployed to Afghanistan in service of their countries. Many more women were involved in Afghanistan during the war working in non-governmental organizations, as journalists, academics, diplomats, healthcare providers, and more. In all of these examples, women asserted their agency—even in a system that constrained their options. While there are many, many books that explore how men were affected by the war in Afghanistan, such as *The Chosen Few* by Gregg Zoroya and Admiral William H. McRaven, and *The Forever War* by Dexter Filkins, there is a deficiency in studies focused on women's

power and agency in this war.<sup>3</sup> First, this thesis will explore how the narratives that emerged from Afghanistan erase women's experiences and women's participation in the war. Second, this thesis will seek to add the reality of women's experiences back into the narratives.

---

<sup>3</sup> "100 Best War in Afghanistan Books of All Time," *BookAuthority*, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://bookauthority.org/books/best-war-in-afghanistan-books>.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

Narratives of war are rooted in societal norms around sex and gender that overvalue masculine dominance and undervalue women. This reflects women's status in society. The theories, laws, and principles explained in this literature review will provide context for the gendered narratives told about women in war.

Many societies are characterized by a focus on the masculine; in war, this is even more exaggerated. The term "hypermasculinity" describes a society's tendency to value masculine traits over feminine traits and to instill those values in children as they begin the socialization process.<sup>4</sup> The traits associated with masculinity, like emotionlessness, violence, and dominance, are generally socialized in early childhood development in communities around the world.<sup>5</sup> These traits are both self-validating and self-fulfilling, meaning young boys are socialized to not express emotions beyond anger or sadness (when a family member or comrade passes), and instead should emote using violence.

Hypermasculinity stems from "machismo." Donald Mosher and Silvan Tomkins define machismo as "a system of ideas forming a world view that chauvinistically exalts male dominance by assuming masculinity, virility, and physicality to be the ideal essence of real men who are adversarial warriors competing for scarce resources (including women as chattel) in a dangerous world."<sup>6</sup> The macho warrior must dominate his conquests. Many of the hierarchies we see in society, such as the dynamic between the

---

<sup>4</sup> Donald L. Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins, "Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation," *The Journal of Sex Research* 25, no. 1 (1988): 60–84.

<sup>5</sup> L. H. M. Ling, "Sex Machine: Global Hypermasculinity and Images of the Asian Woman in Modernity," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 7, no. 2 (1999): 277–306.

<sup>6</sup> Donald L. Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins, "Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation," *The Journal of Sex Research* 25, no. 1 (1988): 64.

victor and the vanquished, or the head of the house and woman, rely on this assumption of machoism.<sup>7</sup> These hierarchies emphasize domination, aggression, and hegemonic masculinity. Boys are taught to embrace their masculinity by suppressing their emotions and learning that they must protect women, whom they are taught are incapable of self-defense or even violence.<sup>8</sup> In other words, machoism sets the standard for what it means to be a *real man* even as it creates the conditions in which women's agency in war and defense is socially proscribed.

These macho traits all correlate to themes present in warfare and narratives of warfare; they determine how men exhibit their masculinity. Men take resources from their enemies as a form of assertion – of both their own manliness and of the defeated side's humiliation. By raping women and taking slaves, for example, the victor shames the defeated side because, in this macho world, shame is worse than death.<sup>9</sup>

Script theory asserts that conflict arises from perceived scarcity and that victors thus claim valuable resources.<sup>10</sup> Tomkins offers the “macho personality constellation” version of script theory that consists of three components: 1) callous sexual attitudes, 2) violence as manly, and 3) danger as exciting.<sup>11</sup> In a warfare setting, the macho personality constellation ends up hurting women because of the belief that warriors, especially the victors, are entitled to the enemy's women, who are seen not as individuals, but as property to be taken so as to emasculate the defeated men.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> This mindset might also contribute to intimate partner abuse and other forms of violence against women in a domestic context; because women are coded as victims.

<sup>9</sup> Mosher and Tomkins, “Scripting the Macho Man.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

In accordance with the mindset of machoism, war narratives depict women innocuous support roles or as sexual objects or victims, but rarely as courageous warriors or the hated enemy. The portrayal of women in war stories suggests that women are not targets of war, nor are they supposed to fight back if they are involved. In most societies, men are the designated ‘Just Warriors’ and women are the ‘Beautiful Souls’ in need of protection.<sup>12</sup> The term ‘Beautiful Souls’ originates from G.W. Hegel but was later borrowed by Jean Bethke Elshtain who wrote that these gendered roles in war solidify women’s social status as noncombatants and men’s as warriors.<sup>13</sup> According to Sjoberg, the concept ‘Beautiful Souls’ means ‘frugal, self-sacrificing, and, at times delicate,’ insofar as women are expected to be against war and violence as well as in need of defense and protection.<sup>14</sup> These gender taboos that Elshtain describes prevent women from taking up arms to defend themselves, further forcing them to rely on men for protection from men.<sup>15</sup> In a realist world, weapons are power and without them, women are perceived as powerless. In American society, the historical exclusion of all women and African American men from arms-bearing roles (such as black soldiers not being allowed to access weapons during the Civil War) “prohibited them from making claims on the state as full citizens.”<sup>16</sup> In Afghanistan, in Ghor province, when women took up arms against the Taliban and protested, the Taliban rejected reports of their actions as

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York : Basic Books, 1987), accessed March 25, 2022, [http://archive.org/details/isbn\\_9780465092161](http://archive.org/details/isbn_9780465092161).

<sup>14</sup> Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 2007), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Elshtain, *Women and War*, 75-80.

<sup>16</sup> Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane* (Columbia University Press, 1996), accessed March 7, 2022, <http://archive.org/details/creatinggijanese00meyer>.

propaganda.<sup>17</sup> Zabinullah Mujahid, a Taliban spokesperson said, “Women will never pick up guns against us. They are helpless and forced by the defeated enemy. They can’t fight.”<sup>18</sup> This is a real-world example of the concept of Beautiful Souls; the Afghan women were dismissed as delicate and incapable.

Social assumptions that women require protection are often codified in legislation. Though posed as protective measures, these laws open the door for dehumanization within governmental institutions. Gender-based laws around the world have restricted women from possessing a legal identity. Societal norms and practices rooted in history continue to restrict some women from obtaining the legal identification that would allow these women to travel, own property, or have autonomy in the eyes of the law.<sup>19</sup>

Historically, in the US and western Europe, coverture stripped women of legal identities. While coverture laws are now mostly outdated and repealed, their effects are long-lasting.<sup>20</sup> Coverture laws originated in Britain, were adopted in the British colonies, and would later influence laws in the United States. The French and Spanish had similar policies. Essentially, coverture reduced a woman to being the property of a man—first, a

---

<sup>17</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison, “Armed Afghan Women Take to Streets in Show of Defiance against Taliban,” *The Guardian*, July 7, 2021, sec. World news, accessed March 24, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/07/armed-afghan-women-take-to-streets-in-show-of-defiance-against-taliban>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Lucia Hammer and Marina Elefante, *Achieving Universal Access to ID: Gender-Based Legal Barriers Against Women and Good Practice Reforms* (Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2019), accessed February 21, 2022, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/32474/Achieving-Universal-Access-to-ID-Gender-based-Legal-Barriers-Against-Women-and-Good-Practice-Reforms.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>20</sup> “Coverture: The Word You Probably Don’t Know But Should,” *National Women’s History Museum*, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://www.womenshistory.org/articles/coverture-word-you-probably-dont-know-should>.

female baby was the property of her father and later, she, as property, would be transferred to her husband.<sup>21</sup> Her status was reflected in her last name: first her father's and then her husband's. Without an independent legal identity, women could not buy or sell property, nor did they have any legal right to make decisions about sexual activity in their marriages.<sup>22</sup> Effectively, women were subject to whatever their fathers or husbands pleased. Additionally, coverture prevented women from making contracts or earning their own wages. Without being legally allowed to earn a living, women were further subject to whomever owned them. In the US, it was not until the Civil War that, out of necessity, women started to gain legal autonomy.<sup>23</sup> While coverture is no longer law, its effects remain pervasive in American society. For instance, marital rape was not illegal until 1980—an example of how husbands could treat their “property” however they chose.<sup>24</sup> By assigning a man responsibility for a woman's protection, coverture gave men a role in society that designated them as stronger and responsible for defending women. Coverture not only stripped women of their legal identity, but also assigns a socialized role for men and women: men as the protector and women as the protected.

Outside of Britain and the United States, similar laws eliminating a woman's legal identity exist today and prohibit women from being seen as capable of protecting themselves. Similarly, the gender norms underpinning coverture still influence the narratives about men and women. The common narrative that women need to be protected in war and men are their protectors is an extension of the logic used to

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> “Equality, Property, and Marriage,” accessed January 4, 2022, <https://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/omalley/120f02/america/marriage/>.

<sup>24</sup> “Coverture.”

disenfranchise and disempower women societally, as has long been the case in places that adopt coverture laws.

Women's assumed vulnerability in war is reflected in Just War theory's civilian protection principle, which states that soldiers should protect civilians, or "non-participants." Non-participation in conflict and the level of "vulnerability" (whether or not a person *deserves* to be harmed) are the two primary factors used to determine civilian status.<sup>25</sup> These factors distinguish women, children, and older or sicker men as those who most often are determined to be civilians since they are not armed, trained, or expected to fight. Thus, over time, sex and age emerged as an easy means by which to distinguish between who deserves to be spared or even protected, but also became conflated, reinforcing the "protect the women and children" narrative that inherently infantilizes women. International and state actors will often employ images of women and children as an appeal meant to draw out strong savior feelings.<sup>26</sup> However, these images neglect the larger context of the harm caused by any civilian death. Adult civilian males and older boys are not included in the protection narrative in part due to the shame that would come with being grouped with women and children.<sup>27</sup>

Another problem with the innocent civilian narrative is that it elides both women's active roles in war and the vulnerability of women whose male family members are drafted or choose to go to war.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, women can fight in wars; many

---

<sup>25</sup> R. Charli Carpenter et al., *"Innocent Women and Children": Gender, Norms and the Protection of Civilians* (Farnham, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), accessed December 7, 2021, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=429673>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



have gone to great lengths and sacrificed tremendously to do so even when they are made unwelcome by men and the male-based institutions of war. To equate womanhood with non-participation in the active fighting of war is simply inaccurate. On the other hand, when men go off to fight wars, the women left behind assume unacknowledged burdens. Not only do they lose a source of income, but they often take on their male family members' roles at home. If they must be "protected," it is because they have not been armed and trained in their own defense.

The civilian immunity principle creates a situation in which women are ignored and then suffer victimization not only because they are assumed to be safe but precisely because the enemy can score a win by demonstrating that they were *not* protected.<sup>29</sup> Sjoberg theorizes that civilian victimization is the assertion of "one belligerent's (masculine) virility and dominance and the revealing of another's (feminized) inadequacy, often inscribed on women's bodies."<sup>30</sup> Sex-specific tactics such as wartime rape actively target women and, grotesquely, are intended to hurt men by hurting the women they assumed responsibility for protecting.<sup>31</sup>

The issue of women's protection can be further extrapolated. The 'protection racket' theory, for example, argues that wars are fought on the pretense that women need protection from outside threats.<sup>32</sup> According to this theory, women must be protected *by* war but not *from* it. Protecting women can become the pretext for men (and 'masculine

---

<sup>29</sup> Laura Sjoberg and Jessica Peet, "A(Nother) Dark Side of the Protection Racket," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 163–182.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> S.R. Peterson, M Vetterling-Braggin, and F.A. Elliston, *Coercion and Rape: The State as a Male Protection Racket*, vol. Feminism and Philosophy (Totowa, NJ, 1977).

states') to fight wars.<sup>33</sup> The irony of the protection racket is that men believe they must fight to protect women but in actuality, women end up protecting themselves from men. Narratives that portray women as in need of protection ignore women's actual experiences in war.

Cynthia Enloe, a leading feminist international relations scholar, wrote the book *Beaches, Bananas, and Bases*, centered around the idea of that the world relies on male-dominated structures. In her first chapter, she asks the crucial question: where are the women? By looking at the women of the world, one develops a better understanding of how the world actually works. Enloe sheds light on the fact that there are significantly more women engaged in international politics than conventional headlines suggest. Feminist IR theory suggests that we must look deeper than traditional foreign policy experts do and pay attention to local and domestic issues.<sup>34</sup> Enloe uses the example of government secretaries whose political relevancy can be seen in their record-keeping and secrecy during World War I. The women who helped document the League of Nations were breaking barriers and following uncharted paths in the world's first international organization.<sup>35</sup> Women, like men, do not fit into one model; Enloe notes that studying all women's lives runs deeper than admiration.<sup>36</sup> Power is a main theme in international relations, but taking a feminist approach means understanding who exactly wields power. The "gendered status quo" relies on unquestioned concepts that are defined as natural or

---

<sup>33</sup> Sjoberg and Peet, "A(Nother) Dark Side of the Protection Racket."

<sup>34</sup> Cynthia Enloe, "Gender Makes the World Go Round: Where Are the Women?," in *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (London, England: University of California Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 5.

biological.<sup>37</sup> Gender is commonly disconnected from the four “Big Picture” global concerns that Enloe states: security, stability, crisis, and development.<sup>38</sup> The denial of girls’ education and women’s reproductive health, combined with masculinized militaries and political parties, contribute to a wider issue of gender roles in international structures.<sup>39</sup> International groups that take a feminized approach to security are dismissed by other accredited international organizations as special interests, thus casting anyone who questions masculine privilege as naïve.<sup>40</sup> Cynthia Enloe’s work transformed how feminist theory is understood. Asking where the rest of the population is in international security will paint a far more complete picture of how the world operates.

After her book came out in 1990, Enloe wrote an article in 1991 called “Does Khaki Become you?” about the relationship between women and war. In conflict and security, the world is conditioned to view women as victims, and it is not entirely wrong. The article explores what happens to women when they become soldiers and are entrenched in a military culture without having been able to contribute to the fundamental structure of the institution.<sup>41</sup> By seeking equality, women joined the military to achieve the same credibility that men are given despite evidence of discrimination and sexual assault.<sup>42</sup> Enloe argues that military beliefs are internalized over-time. One of the examples she provides is when the public feels “more national pride when [their] government has won a war than when [their] government has resolved an international

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Cynthia Enloe, “Does Khaki Become You?,” *New Internationalist*, last modified July 5, 1991, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://newint.org/features/1991/07/05/khaki>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

conflict diplomatically.”<sup>43</sup> The hierarchical structure and militaristic beliefs place stereotypical masculine roles, like soldiers, ahead of more feminized roles. Enloe observes that “women all over the world are both victims and participants in the militarization game,” and the system that relies on women to maintain it.<sup>44</sup> The military and feminism may seem like two converse approaches to viewing security, but Cynthia Enloe draws the connection between them.

These theories and concepts help us understand the gendered narratives of war. Hypermasculinity and the Beautiful Souls construct assign men and women socialized roles in war that discount women’s experiences. Both in Afghanistan and, on a lesser scale in the U.S. military, women protect themselves and their families and communities, but their strength goes unacknowledged and unheralded. The following chapter will look at the common narratives told about men and women in war.

---

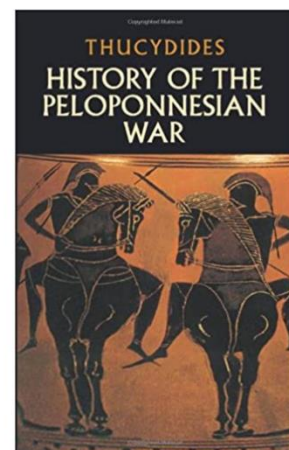
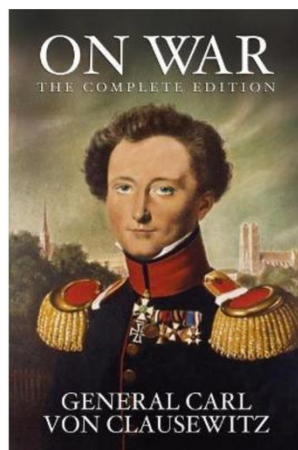
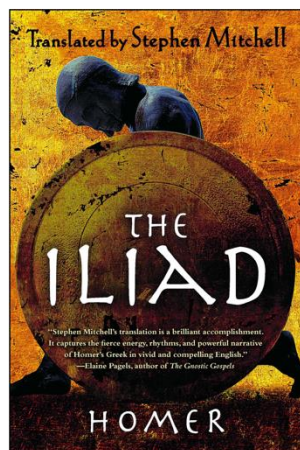
<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 2: Gendered Narratives

### *Narratives About Men*

Everyone is involved in war, but not everyone is talked about in war. When we hear war stories, positive images of courageous men dominate the narratives. The top 10 war books of all time, according to HistoryNet, have a few things in common: 1) they are all written by men, 2) nearly all of them feature heroic men charging into battle, and 3) they hardly mention women unless they are prostitutes, damsels, or mothers.<sup>45</sup> Among these books are *The Illiad* by Homer, *History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides, *On War* by Carl Von Clausewitz, and *The Face of Battle* by John Keegan. And we are all



Google Images

familiar with famous soldiers such as Achilles, T.E. Lawrence, SGT York, and Genghis Khan. These authors and the heroes in their books tell a one-sided, one-gendered narrative. Not only do these books tell a story, but they also share a version of history that erases women from the narrative of war.

---

<sup>45</sup> “The Top 10 War Books of All Time,” *Historynet*, last modified May 24, 2018, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.historynet.com/top-10-war-books-time/>.

One of the most famous written war stories, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, is told from an entirely male perspective of history, practically eliminating any roles women held in Ancient Greece. Thucydides defined history as politics and war—both of which were male-only roles, indicating that the only war stories worth telling were the ones in which men were the main character.<sup>46</sup> On the same lines, John Keegan, a famous war historian, wrote in *A History of Warfare*, “If warfare is as old as history and as universal as mankind, we must now enter the supremely important limitation that it is an entirely masculine activity.”<sup>47</sup> In saying this, Keegan essentially removes women from all war narratives ever.<sup>48</sup> By the same token, Keegan wrote, “warfare is the one human activity from which women, with the most insignificant exceptions, have always and everywhere stood apart.”<sup>49</sup> By proclaiming that women do not belong in war, and that women are insignificant when they do, Keegan negates all of the many absolutely crucial roles women play.

The gendered narratives that display men in war show them as decisionmakers, political leaders, strategists, soldiers, and enemies.<sup>50</sup> Most western war movies depict war through the lens of an American male soldier. Hollywood and its NATO counterparts emphasize male heroes to evoke feelings of bravery, courage, and heroism. Some of the movies that bring this heroism narrative to life include *Letters from Iwo Jima*, *The Hurt Locker*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Platoon*. These films fall back on the societal

---

<sup>46</sup> “Rereading Thucydides: Where Are the Women?,” *The Strategy Bridge*, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2019/10/8/rereading-thucydides-where-are-the-women>.

<sup>47</sup> John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf : Distributed by Random House, Inc., 1993), accessed March 2, 2022, [http://archive.org/details/historyofwarfare0000keeg\\_v5i8](http://archive.org/details/historyofwarfare0000keeg_v5i8), 76.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>50</sup> Sjoberg, *Gender, War & Conflict*.

expectation of masculinity and the American soldiers who save the day. Laura Sjoberg points out that “the link between masculinity and soldiering [sic] is cemented in stories of men’s roles in wars.”<sup>51</sup> Essentially, the portrayal of soldiers in war films and books strengthens the expectations of honorable, brave male soldiers in the western conception of war.

Furthermore, military leaders incorporate another gendered narrative that all men are militants. Sjoberg reminds us that “men die in wars” obviously, but because men are assumed to be contributors to war, they are automatically coded as combatants by their enemies.<sup>52</sup> This is especially relevant and harmful in modern-day drone warfare in which the civilian collateral damage is high. For instance, under the Obama administration, any military-age male (MAM) in a drone strike zone was considered a combatant.<sup>53</sup> After a U.S. air strike in 2019, AFRICOM claimed it had targeted and killed three “terrorists” in Somalia.<sup>54</sup> However, Amnesty International further investigated the killings and found the men had no connection with al-Shabaab. Men are considered combatants because of the gendered vulnerability narrative. In this binary, when women need protection, it is assumed that men are the protectors and thus, need to exhibit violence. This assumption is also harmful to women because, when a husband or older son is killed, it is harder to

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>53</sup> Conor Friedersdorf, “Under Obama, Men Killed by Drones Are Presumed to Be Terrorists,” *The Atlantic*, last modified May 29, 2012, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/05/under-obama-men-killed-by-drones-are-presumed-to-be-terrorists/257749/>.

<sup>54</sup> “The US Military Claims These Men It Killed Were ‘Terrorists’ but We Know They Were Civilian Farmers,” *Amnesty International*, last modified September 30, 2019, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/us-military-shows-appalling-disregard-for-civilians-killed-in-somalia-air-strike/>.

provide for a family with fewer potential income-earners, not to mention the grief and trauma that accompanies the death of a loved one.<sup>55</sup>

### *Narratives about Women*

Common phrases represent the deeply ingrained conventional and uncritical views of women in war that describe them as – and make them into – rape victims and prizes; gentle caretakers; cruel heartbreakers; traitors and sirens; masculinized female soldiers, like GI Jane; monsters; and prostitutes. The following will offer some examples and explanations of these narratives.

As mentioned previously, the commonly used phrase in war, “protect the women and children,” assumes that women have no agency in their own survival and thus, must rely on men. Throughout centuries of warfare and plundering, women became the sought-after prize for conquering a new territory. Not only would the victors acquire new territory or riches, but it was accompanied by the enemy’s women. Women were desired as a form of property that could be taken for consumption. Raping the enemy’s women was not only pleasurable for the victors, but it also came with the added benefit of hurting the vanquished. Rape and sex are accompanied by shame and men associated with raped women tend to feel personally attacked. *A Woman in Berlin* by Anonymous is an autobiography about the mass rape of German women by the Soviet Army following the fall of Berlin.<sup>56</sup> While it is far from the first-time women were plundered, it is an excellent look into the ways in which women are understood as a prize of war.

---

<sup>55</sup> Enloe, “Gender Makes the World Go Round: Where Are the Women?”

<sup>56</sup> Anonymous, *A Woman in Berlin* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005).



Anonymous takes back her power and agency after experiencing sexual violence and survives even when women were directly targeted by the Soviets.<sup>57</sup> This autobiography illustrates how Soviet soldiers' actions in Berlin made German women more insecure—essentially forcing women to protect themselves and their daughters in whatever ways they could. The victimization of women in war narratives feeds into modern-day opinions on who should be protected in conflict.

Women also often show up as the caretakers of the men in wartime—whether that be as nurses, mothers, or wives. For every soldier who is sent to fight, women are left behind to care for children or elders and their home while the man fights a war. In American society, the phrase “mom and apple pie” was used as the staple of wholesomeness and traditional American values—it denotes a patriotic image of American motherhood. During World War II, when American soldiers were asked why they enlisted they would say “for mom and apple pie.”<sup>58</sup> This saying portrays women as a symbol, or an ideal, that men fight for. In reality, war relies on women. However, women's stories and experiences are too often simplified as a supporting role for men. Women who stay behind when their spouses or children leave for an overseas deployment end up caring for children, paying the bills, and upkeeping the home all by herself, all the while worrying if her soldier will return alive or in a box. It is an overwhelming, stressful job that is unappreciated, and the job does not end when the soldier returns home. The after effects of war linger for years, and soldiers rarely come home as the same person that left. For instance, a Google search for “military wife”

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> “Motherhood and Apple Pie,” accessed March 7, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/motherhood-and-apple-pie>.

yields endless patriotic images of wives crying and embracing their husbands. U.S. narratives are often exported around the world as films and television shows—implanting the idea of who and what a military spouse should be.

In contrast, “Dear John Letters” became known in the US as the break-up letters sent to soldiers during WWII and in subsequent wars.<sup>59</sup> These letters gave servicemen permission to emote and act out in rage. In retaliation, reporters dubbed the women who sent these letters “traitors” who should be more supportive of the American war effort by not breaking soldiers’ hearts.<sup>60</sup> The clear expectation is that mothers, wives, and girlfriends back home exist only to support their men when they are away at war.

---

<sup>59</sup> “It’s Not You, It’s Me: How World War II’s ‘Dear John’ Letters Changed American Society,” *Time*, February 14, 2022, accessed March 9, 2022, <https://time.com/6137746/dear-john-letters-world-war-ii/>.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

Women also show up in war stories as traitors. Women served as spies of course, but more often they were used as scapegoats for failed war efforts. They were even described as “honey pots” meaning there was an inherent distrust of women, particularly attractive women, as conniving Sirens (like in Homer’s *Odyssey*), as is evidenced by two of the most famous women associated with war being Mata Hari and Tokyo Rose. Mata Hari was a dancer, prostitute and so-called German spy, and had relationships with high-ranking military officers of several European nations.<sup>61</sup> She turned to



*Image 1 Mata Hari (Google images)*

prostitution in France to stay out of poverty after leaving her abusive husband.<sup>62</sup> The French government accused her of treason and used her as a justification for French casualties during the war.<sup>63</sup> Another example is Tokyo Rose who was the seventh person convicted of treason in the U.S. for her attempts to “demoralize American soldiers”

---

<sup>61</sup> “‘I Am Ready’: Mata Hari Faced a Firing Squad for Spying — and Refused a Blindfold.,” *Washington Post*, n.d., accessed March 9, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/10/15/i-am-ready-mata-hari-faced-a-firing-squad-for-spying-and-refused-a-blindfold/>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

through a Japanese radio broadcast during WWII.<sup>64</sup> The last example is from D-Day 1945, when the many French vigilantes punished women accused of “horizontal collaboration” – sleeping with the enemy – after the war ended.<sup>65</sup> It did not matter the circumstances of the sexual encounter, be it transactional, romantic or via rape, women



*Image 2 Punishers (usually men) after D-Day attacks on innocent women for sleeping with the enemy (TIME)*

were abused as a result. They dragged women accused of sexual impurity into the street, humiliated them, shaved their heads, smeared tar on them, and sometimes even escalated to murder.<sup>66</sup> Tokyo Rose, Mata Hari, and French women after D-Day are examples of women who were deemed traitors

to their countries for their betrayal of male soldiers (although the full stories are more nuanced). These notorious stories of treasonous women provide another example of how women show up in war. Of course, we only hear the stories of these famous traitors, but not about the women experiencing the war in other ways, whether as soldiers or courageous civilians.

---

<sup>64</sup> “Iva Toguri d’Aquino and ‘Tokyo Rose,’” Page, *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, accessed March 9, 2022, <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/iva-toguri-daquino-and-tokyo-rose>.

<sup>65</sup> “Writer: ‘This Picture Tells a Tragic Story of What Happened to Women After D-Day,’” *Time*, accessed April 24, 2022, <https://time.com/5303229/women-after-d-day/>.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

Of the few women whose stories are told as heroic, the either gave up their femininity to fit in with the military. To the first, for centuries, women traded in their dresses for army boots, disguised themselves as men, and joined the fight. Joan of Arc is one of the few women depicted in history as a French war heroine, but only by adopting masculine traits.<sup>67</sup> After receiving divine guidance, she chopped off her hair, put on a man's military uniform, and led the French army to a victory in Orleans. To participate in war, she relinquished her femininity and even that was not enough to save her from execution.<sup>68</sup> Deborah



**Image 3** *Joan of Arc* (Google Images)

Sampson is an example of an American women hiding her femininity to fight in the Revolutionary War. She disguised herself as a man and was the first woman to earn a full military pension.<sup>69</sup> When she was discovered to be a woman, the Patriot Army honorably discharged her. Lastly, the G.I. Jane term originated to describe American women in the Women's Army Corp (WAC) in WWII.<sup>70</sup> When the WAC was first developed, the claim was that "a good soldier epitomized conventional masculine qualities," such as authoritative, strong, logical, and well-

---

<sup>67</sup> Mariette Kalinowski, "'Slut, Bitch, Dyke'—Joan of Arc and the Modern Military Woman," *The Daily Beast*, August 21, 2013, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/08/21/slut-bitch-dyke-joan-of-arc-and-the-modern-military-woman>.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> "Deborah Sampson," *National Women's History Museum*, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/deborah-sampson>.

<sup>70</sup> Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*.

disciplined.<sup>71</sup> In U.S. narratives, G.I. Jane frames an image of a defeminized servicewoman who embraced masculine characters to fit into the military.<sup>72</sup> The women who joined the fight are considered heroines who gave up their feminine identity to be taken seriously in the military.

Finally, women can undoubtedly be violent. They are capable of suicide bombings, terrorism, and even genocide. Biology is not an exclusionary factor for violence, but societal preconceptions of what women are capable of prevents accountability. Sjoberg and Gentry explain that violent women are described as mothers, monsters, or whores.<sup>73</sup> The mother narrative describes women's violence as a way of taking care of men and a form of nurturing. The monster narrative eliminates blame from women by casting them as insane and denying them as 'real' women or even human. Finally, the whore narrative describes women's violence as driven by a sexual dependence on men and an erotic dysfunction.<sup>74</sup> Essentially, the act of labeling violence as "women's violence" separates women from traditional violent groups because of their femininity.<sup>75</sup> The difference between recognition and integration prevents women from being seen as people instead of their gender. By portraying violent women as a flaw in humanity, it protects the peaceful woman image and prevents accountability for violent actions.<sup>76</sup> It also dismisses women from the legitimized roles as soldiers wielding violence in conflict.

---

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Sjoberg and Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*.

<sup>74</sup> Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 2007), 13.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 13.



## Confronting the Narratives: The U.S.-led War in Afghanistan

*“No nation can donate liberation to another nation. These values must be fought for and won by the people themselves. They can only grow and flourish when they are planted by the people in their own soil and watered by their own blood and tears.”*

– Malalai Joya<sup>77</sup>

As described in the foregoing chapters, the narratives of war exclude women, as if they are somehow unaffected by war, as if war stays on battlefields. Despite their crucial contributions as troops, journalists, aid providers, and more, women’s roles do not get highlighted. Essentially, women are excludable until they prove they belong in a society built for men.<sup>78</sup> These types of contributions to war are rarely recognized when they do not fit into the gendered narratives previously discussed. In reality, however, women do not conform to the typical war stories told about them. This case study aims to contradict the simplicity of the previously discussed narratives told about women in war.

Common images of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan include women trapped in blue burqas, evil Taliban fighters, heroic male American soldiers, and wives back home awaiting their husbands’ return from war. And it is true that, when the Taliban initially took power decades ago, Afghan women were stripped of their right to education, their right to go out in public without a man, their access to the justice system, and more. And, even before the Taliban’s rise, Afghanistan had a deeply patriarchal culture in which women usually played very specific roles, especially in the countryside. Yet, even under

---

<sup>77</sup> N, P, and R, “Malalai Joya: ‘A Woman Among Warlords,’” *NPR*, October 27, 2009, sec. World, accessed April 24, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=114207995>.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 10.



these circumstances, Afghan women asserted their agency, often in subtle ways, as will be discussed.

The U.S. intervention and occupation in Afghanistan used Afghan women as a justification for war. This narrative neglected Afghan women's efforts and individuality. Afghan Women started organizations like the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), flew planes for the Afghan army, created underground schools for young girls, and ran safe houses for abused women.

Narratives of the US-led war in Afghanistan also focus on male Afghan leaders, famous US and NATO generals, and western male soldiers' experiences, though women from all over the world worked with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to assist with the humanitarian fallout of the war. Women joined the Afghan security forces and broke barriers for women serving in combat, while others supported their husbands, sons, and brothers by finding their own income source. Women's stories as soldiers, mothers, warlords, activists, prostitutes, artists, journalists, and aid-workers are not widely publicized in movies, or news outlets because they exist outside of the common, gendered narrative. Afghan women and foreign women operating in their country showed courage and resilience over the last four decades; women played a bigger role in war than the narratives tell us. The following chapters offers a glimpse into the women involved on all sides of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan.

### **Context for the U.S.-led War in Afghanistan**

Before looking at the women involved in the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, this section will summarize the historical context. Over the last four decades, Afghanistan

endured three separate wars. In 1979, the USSR invaded Afghanistan and started funding the Afghan Army to retain communist roots in the region.<sup>79</sup> The U.S. responded to the Soviet Union by funding and arming the Mujahedeen (warlords) in another Cold War proxy war. As a result of the devastating effects of the Soviet-led war, millions of Afghans fled to neighboring Pakistan. From 1989, the U.S., Soviet Union, Afghanistan, and Pakistan came to a peace agreement guaranteeing Afghan independence and the withdrawal of 100,000 Soviet troops. When the Soviets withdrew, the Mujahedeen broke out in a civil war over the future of Afghanistan. While warlords fought over power, the Afghan population yearned for peace. The Taliban rose to power in 1995 on the assurance of peace and enforcement of “Islamic values.”<sup>80</sup> However, their version of governance halted women’s education and stripped women of their employment and thus, their self-sufficiency. The Taliban also terminated all opium production, a main source of income for warlords and many rural Afghans.<sup>81</sup> Both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia recognized the Taliban as the leaders of Afghanistan, but the U.S. and NATO refused. From 1995-2001, the Taliban regime held power over an increasing swath of the country and led a strict fundamentalist regime.<sup>82</sup>

After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the U.S. sought reprisal on Osama bin Laden who operated out of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. On October 7, the U.S. and NATO allies, initiated bombings on al-Qaeda and Taliban targets in Afghanistan.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> “A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan,” *PBS NewsHour*, last modified May 4, 2011, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june11-timeline-afghanistan>.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> “Annex B | Afghanistan Timeline,” *National Defense University Press*, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/915975/annex-b-afghanistan-timeline/>.

US-led forces, working with Afghan warlords (the Northern Alliance) entered Afghanistan in pursuit of Al Qaeda’s leaders. Then, on December 9, the Taliban abandoned Kandahar, which is generally recognized as the end of the first Taliban regime.<sup>84</sup> Approximately six months later, President George W. Bush called for the reconstruction of Afghanistan and Congress appropriated over \$38 billion in humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan from 2001 to 2009.<sup>85</sup> In 2005, President Bush and President Karzai signed an agreement that gave American forces and their allies full use of Afghan military facilities to conduct the war against Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters.<sup>86</sup> NATO then took command in Eastern Afghanistan, from a U.S.-led coalition force, and assumed responsibility for security across the entirety of Afghanistan.<sup>87</sup> Then, when President Obama assumed power in 2009, the American strategy in Afghanistan shifted again; the policy became less about reconstruction and more about promoting Afghan self-sufficiency. As a result, the U.S. government deployed 21,000 personnel and NATO send 5,000 additional troops to assist and train Afghan security force.<sup>88</sup> NATO concluded its twelve-year combat mission in Afghanistan in 2014. Obama abandoned plans to withdraw troops in 2015 and Trump committed to continued military involvement to prevent “a vacuum for terrorists.”<sup>89</sup> In 2015, NATO began its follow-on mission *Resolute Support*, and sent 12,000 personnel to provide

---

<sup>84</sup> “A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan.”

<sup>85</sup> “Annex B | Afghanistan Timeline.”

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> “A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan.”

further training and support to Afghan security forces.<sup>90</sup> In February 2019, the U.S. signed an agreement on a peace deal with the Taliban that served as the terms for the U.S. withdrawal from the country by May 2021. This was the first step towards the Taliban regaining power in Afghanistan.

On April 14, 2021, President Biden announced his intention to completely withdraw U.S. troops by 9/11.<sup>91</sup> The American-backed Afghan government crumbled faster than most anticipated as the Taliban quickly overtook Kabul on August 15. Finally, the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan officially ended on August 30, 2021 when its final troops left the country. While the history of war in Afghanistan is much more complex than this summary provides, it is important to understand the historical context in which women lived their lives, raised families, struggled for democracy and women's rights, built institutions, promoted peace, fought in the military, and led militias for over four decades.

Beyond just the timeline and history of Afghanistan, the country is much more intricate than the common narratives tell. For instance, Afghanistan is home to a broad range of ethnicities. According to the World Population Review, “of the 31 million or so Afghan residents, 42% are Pashtun, 27% Tajik, 9% Hazara, 9% Uzbek, 4% Aimak, 3% Turkmen, 2% Baloch and 4% fall into an unspecified "other" group.”<sup>92</sup> The Taliban are

---

<sup>90</sup> “Annex B | Afghanistan Timeline.”

<sup>91</sup> “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” *The White House*, last modified April 14, 2021, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>92</sup> “Afghanistan Population 2022 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs),” accessed April 20, 2022, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/afghanistan-population>.

Sunni Muslim and primarily Pashtun; they often target minority Shiite groups.<sup>93</sup> Beyond ethnicity, there is a fundamental difference between Afghans in rural and urban provinces. The access to opportunities and basic needs varies drastically between provinces. According to the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) survey more than 70 percent of Afghans live in rural areas and only 23.4 percent of Afghans inhabit urban areas.<sup>94</sup> The rural population also tends to be more conservative, traditional, and absolute poverty is widespread.<sup>95</sup> Comparatively, the urban population are more liberal, are connected to the internet, and have higher levels of disposable income.<sup>96</sup> Literacy rates continue to be a limiting factor for social and economic mobility in Afghanistan. The Afghan Ministry of Economy confirmed in 2020 that 90 percent of Afghans are living below the poverty line.<sup>97</sup> The literacy rate of people in Afghanistan ages 15 to 24 is only 47 percent and the number of illiterate women remains well above that of men.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, the Afghan Ministry of Education revealed that at least 7,000 schools do not even have buildings, meaning that people in rural provinces are even less likely to receive an education if there is no school to attend.<sup>99</sup> After decades of war, the inequality is growing and the Afghan economy lacks the resources to promote social and

---

<sup>93</sup> “Foreign Military Studies Office Publications - Whither the Taliban?,” accessed April 20, 2022, <https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/990306-taliban.htm>.

<sup>94</sup> Tamim Asey, “The Price of Inequality: The Dangerous Rural-Urban Divide in Afghanistan,” *Global Security Review*, March 5, 2019, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://globalsecurityreview.com/inequality-dangerous-rural-urban-divide-afghanistan/>.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> “Ministry Confirms 90% of Afghans Live Below Poverty Line,” *TOLONews*, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://tolonews.com/business/ministry-confirms-90-afghans-live-below-poverty-line>.

<sup>98</sup> “UIS Statistics,” accessed April 20, 2022, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=121>.

<sup>99</sup> “No Buildings for 7,000 Afghan Schools: Ministry,” *TOLONews*, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-166416>.

economic mobility, especially for the urban population. The high levels of poverty, illiteracy, and impacts of war contribute to young boys joining the Taliban as a source of income, thus perpetuating a cycle of violence.<sup>100</sup> All these factors are a result of decades of war and violence that make reconstruction nearly impossible, especially without the assistance of aid. Nonetheless, women have persistently asserted agency throughout the wars and defied the persistent narratives that coopt their stories and portray them instrumentally.

For example, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, since 1995, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which was established in 1977 during Soviet occupation, and other international human rights organizations displayed photos of violence committed by the Taliban against women to raise awareness for their situation. These organizations operated independently and took tremendous risks to protect Afghan women and gather evidence about their experiences. The world paid little attention. On August 26, 2001, CNN aired a documentary called *Beneath the Veil* that made little headway. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks happened, however, President Bush's September 20 address cited Afghan women's education as one of the reasons for taking military action against the Taliban.<sup>101</sup> CNN aired *Beneath the Veil* again on September 22 and 5.5 million viewers tuned in.<sup>102</sup> The Bush Administration swiftly embraced Afghan women as an oppressed group in need of protection, and thus, as another reason to justify to Americans the need for violent intervention. First Lady Laura Bush delivered a

---

<sup>100</sup> Asey, "The Price of Inequality."

<sup>101</sup> "President Declares 'Freedom at War with Fear,'" accessed April 20, 2022, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

<sup>102</sup> "Bush Burqa," accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www3.trincoll.edu/csrpl/RINV015No1/Bush%20burqa.htm>.

humanitarian call to fight the War on Terror and portrayed the American military efforts as liberating:

“Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. Yet the terrorists who helped rule that country now plot and plan in many countries. And they must be stopped. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”<sup>103</sup>

Bush solely attributed the “liberation” of Afghan women to U.S. military gains. This narrative ignores the important and ongoing work of RAWA and other women who have worked for decades on behalf of their own rights in Afghanistan.

The burqa, similarly was coopted by foreign narratives, brandished worldwide as a symbol of women’s oppression. The media used the removal of the burqa as an alluring metaphor for Afghan women’s new freedom. For example, the Washington Post published an article in 2001 titled “Veil is Lifted in Mazar-e Sharif; New Freedoms Embraced as City Emerges from Taliban Rule”<sup>104</sup> and the Boston Globe titled an article “Veil Lifts on Afghan Women’s Future.”<sup>105</sup> Both articles indicate that by removing the burqa, Afghan women were suddenly liberated from oppression. However, Zoya, an active RAWA member, emphasized that removing the “burqa is a symbolic sign of liberation, but not actual liberation.”<sup>106</sup> In her autobiography, Zoya described her view

---

<sup>103</sup> “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush,” accessed April 20, 2022, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Doug Struck, “Veil Is Lifted in Mazar-e Sharif,” *Washington Post*, November 12, 2001, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/11/12/veil-is-lifted-in-mazar-e-sharif/de3a9831-526d-4540-9440-5b525418b967/>.

<sup>105</sup> “Bush Burqa.”

<sup>106</sup> RAWA Afghanistan, *Grit TV: A Voice from RAWA: Zoya on Afghanistan (Part1/2)*, 2009, accessed April 7, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T56poXXmDoU>.

from the burqa as “looking at [Afghanistan’s] dry and dusty mountains through the bars of a prison cell.”<sup>107</sup> However, RAWA members used the burqa as a tool to discreetly spread their message across Afghanistan by distributing RAWA publications to Afghans. This was possible because a burqa, under the Taliban, was the only passport women needed to enter the country.<sup>108</sup> The courageous actions of RAWA members are not widely known by the world because they contradict the narrative of helpless, oppressed Afghan women wearing a burqa.

Even today, the cooption of Afghan women’s narratives continues. A live news channel in Los Angeles, California, KTLA, projected this narrative in a headline on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021: “Help protect the women and children in Afghanistan with UNICEF USA.”<sup>109</sup> The headline was meant to draw people in and rally support for UNICEF’s mission in Afghanistan, but instead it perpetuates the belief that Afghan women are unable to help themselves.

The following chapter will look at the stories of women – Afghan and foreign - who directly contributed to the fight.

---

<sup>107</sup> Zoya, John Follain, and Rita Cristofari, *Zoya’s Story: An Afghan Woman’s Struggle for Freedom*, First. (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> “Help Protect the Women and Children in Afghanistan with UNICEF USA,” *KTLA*, September 2, 2021, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://ktla.com/morning-news/help-protect-the-women-and-children-in-afghanistan-with-unicef-usa/>.



## Chapter 3: Soldiers

The U.S.-led war in Afghanistan was a turning point for women in the military. Over the course of the 20-year conflict, thousands of Afghan, American, and allied women served. The military, an inherently male institution, is an especially harsh atmosphere for women to be a part of and yet, some of the most courageous and mentally tough soldiers make it through. Everything in the military, from physical fitness to uniforms to childcare programs, was designed by men, for men. For example, Afghan women had to tailor their own uniforms to fit and took their young children on missions because there was no alternative. Women were thrown into the military without much consideration for the struggles that they might deal with while they are on duty.<sup>110</sup>

The integration process for women in the U.S. military was much more gradual than that Afghan women went through. American women who served in Afghanistan before 2015 led the push to repeal the US ban on women in combat-roles.<sup>111</sup> Since 9/11, more than 300,000 American women have served in Iraq and Afghanistan and more than 9,000 earned Combat Action Badges.<sup>112</sup> As of August 2021, women comprise 19.2 percent of the officer core and 16.9 percent of enlisted personnel across all U.S. service branches.<sup>113</sup> On the Afghan side, more than 6,300 women served in the former Afghan

---

<sup>110</sup> Robin Peterson, "Fighting to Fight: An Analysis of the Women Who Are Changing National Security," 2021.

<sup>111</sup> "Zoe Bedell," accessed October 13, 2021, <https://www.cnas.org/people/zoe-bedell>.

<sup>112</sup> Ways to Support et al., "Over 200 Years of Service: The History of Women in the U.S. Military," *United Service Organizations*, 200, accessed March 24, 2022, <https://www.uso.org/stories/3005-over-200-years-of-service-the-history-of-women-in-the-us-military>.

<sup>113</sup> "DMDC Web," accessed October 23, 2021, <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>.

National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) since 2010.<sup>114</sup> According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report in July 2021, 4,253 women served in the police, 1,913 in the army, and 146 in the air force.<sup>115</sup> Even though the number of women serving increased, women usually kept their jobs secret from their family and their neighbors to avoid death threats from the Taliban.<sup>116</sup> On top of external threats, Afghan women in the army struggled to find meaningful assignment opportunities and the majority of them remained in Kabul because they were not allowed on combat missions.<sup>117</sup> Much of the recruitment process for the Afghan security forces came from a Western push to create gender parity in Afghanistan, as fast as possible, without much consideration for cultural limitations.

In both countries, women joined an organization dominated by men and defied the narratives that tell women they are not part of the hero narratives. Despite the risk of sexual assault in the military, discrimination for promotions, and risking their lives, women joined the fight. But we do not hear the stories of the Female Tactical Platoon or the famed woman warlord or the first women helicopter pilots in the Afghan forces. Nor do we hear much about the women in the CST and FET programs who paved the way for American women in combat. Their stories are not told because they do not fit into the

---

<sup>114</sup> Roshan Noorzai, “Former Afghan Female Soldier: ‘I Am So Afraid’ Under Taliban,” *VOA*, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/former-afghan-female-soldier-i-am-so-afraid-under-taliban-/6376154.html>.

<sup>115</sup> John F. Sopko, *Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Arlington, Virginia: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, February 2021), accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-18-LL.pdf>.

<sup>116</sup> Lynzy Billing, “Female Afghan Soldiers Face a Battle on All Fronts,” *ZORA*, October 2, 2019, accessed October 11, 2021, <https://zora.medium.com/female-afghan-soldiers-face-a-battle-on-all-fronts-ac78722326a1>.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

victim or 'American' hero narrative told about Afghanistan. The following section seeks to identify and share the stories of courageous, and sometimes violent, women who played an active role in the fighting during the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan.

## American Soldiers

Women who served in the U.S. armed forces during the war in Afghanistan faced their own set of obstacles. The U.S. Department of Defense adopted the “Risk Rule” in February 1988 that excluded women from “noncombat units or missions if the risks of exposure to direct combat, hostile fire, or capture were equal to or greater than the risks in the combat units they supported.”<sup>118</sup> Then, in 1994, Secretary Aspin rescinded the “risk rule” and approved a new Direct Ground Combat Definition and Assignment Rule.<sup>119</sup> The rule and definition stated<sup>120</sup>:

A. Rule. Service members are eligible to be assigned to all positions for which they are qualified, except that women shall be excluded from assignment to units below the brigade<sup>36</sup> level whose primary mission is to engage in direct combat on the ground, as defined below.

B. Definition. Direct ground combat is engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force’s personnel. Direct ground combat takes place well forward on the battlefield while locating and closing with the enemy to defeat them by fire, maneuver, or shock effect.<sup>37</sup>

Essentially, this rule created male-billeted and female-billeted slots; all positions were open to men, but it excluded women from combat roles because of their gender. As the war in Afghanistan evolved, the definition of “direct ground combat” became less clear because of the war’s “nonlinear” nature.<sup>121</sup> The insurgent conflict in Afghanistan lacked clearly defined “frontlines” and all soldiers, regardless of gender, were at risk. During the War on Terror, a RAND report concluded that hundreds of women Army members received a Combat Action Badge, suggesting that the Army recognized women

---

<sup>118</sup> Kristy N. Kamarck, *Women in Combat: Issues for Congress* (Congressional Research Service, December 13, 2016), accessed April 18, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R42075.pdf>.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

serving in combat, regardless of the rule.<sup>122</sup> After recognizing thousands of women's contributions to the war in Afghanistan, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter ordered the military to open all combat jobs to women, without exception in 2015.<sup>123</sup> The women discussed below both experienced the impacts of the Direct Ground Combat Rule and challenged the system to repeal it.

Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan demonstrated a need for combat-ready women to collect intelligence and complete missions, even before the military allowed women in combat. The U.S. military needed American women to assist Special Forces and reach areas of Afghan society off limits to men.<sup>124</sup> Admiral William H. McRaven's, former head of the Joint Special Operations Command, saw the value in training and attaching women to special operations units.<sup>125</sup> The Cultural Support Teams and Female Engagement Teams were innovations born out of necessity for the changing tactical environment in Afghanistan. The contributions of the servicewomen in Afghanistan opened doors for women in the future, but also forced the military to welcome new perspective.

---

<sup>122</sup> Margaret C. Harrell et al., *Assessing the Assignment Policy for Army Women* (RAND Corporation, April 28, 2007), accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG590-1.html>.

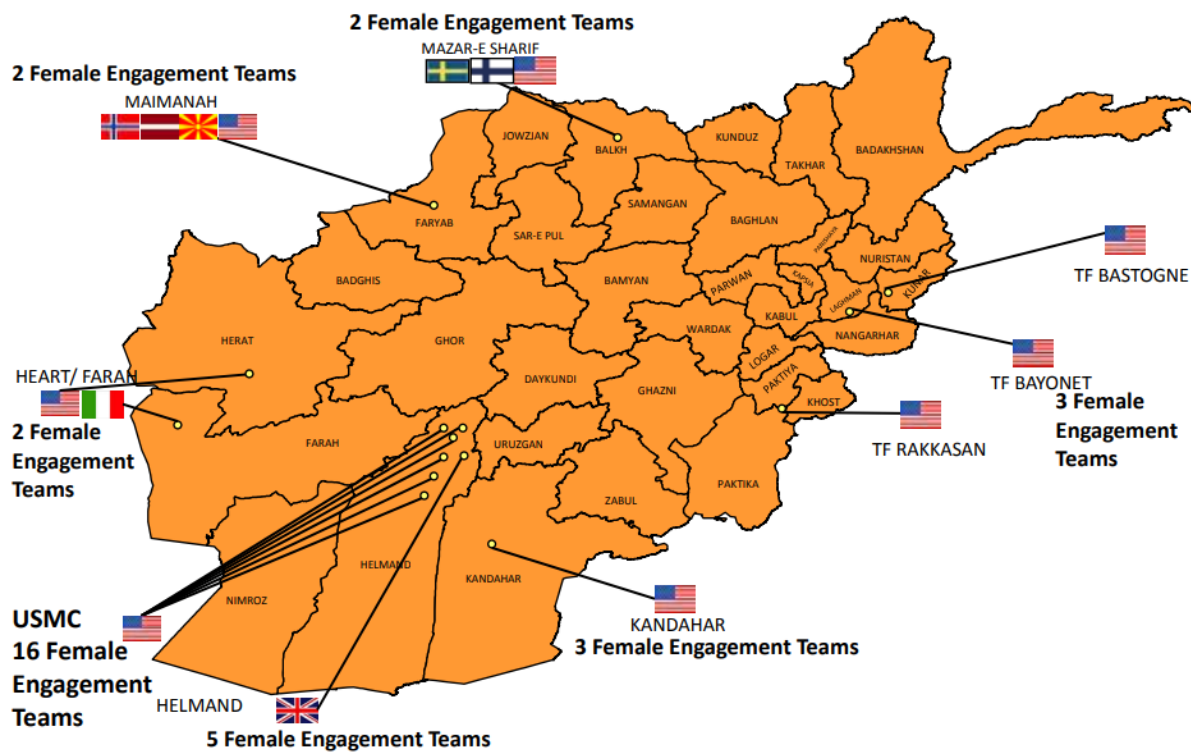
<sup>123</sup> "Remarks on the Women-in-Service Review," *U.S. Department of Defense*, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/632495/remarks-on-the-women-in-service-review/>.

<sup>124</sup> "The U.S. Army Cultural Support Team Program: Historical Timeline," accessed May 11, 2021, [https://arsof-history.org/articles/v12n2\\_cst\\_timeline\\_page\\_1.html](https://arsof-history.org/articles/v12n2_cst_timeline_page_1.html).

<sup>125</sup> Xanthe Ackerman, "When GI Jane Joined Special Ops," *The Daily Beast*, June 17, 2015, accessed April 4, 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/17/when-gi-jane-joined-special-ops>.

## Female Engagement Teams (FETs)

Marine Corp combat units can respond to crises anywhere and they typically spearhead conflict operations.<sup>126</sup> In the case of Afghanistan, Marines were some of the first Americans on the ground and the first to realize the importance of American women on missions to collect information from Afghan women. To respond to the cultural barriers in Afghanistan and gaps in intelligence, the Marine Corp created the first Female



*Figure 1* Map of where FETs were deployed in Afghanistan (Zoe Bedell Presentation)

Engagement Teams (FET) modelled after the Lioness Program in Iraq. Since women only represent 8 percent of the Marine Corp, there was a limited capacity to how far they

<sup>126</sup> Ways to Support et al., “What Separates the Marines From the Other Branches?,” *United Service Organizations*, accessed November 28, 2021, <https://www.uso.org/stories/2910-what-separates-the-marines-from-the-other-branches>.

could reach.<sup>127</sup> Each FET consisted of two female Marines whose mission was to “engage Afghan men and women in order to influence the population in accordance with the commander’s objectives and in support of the GIRoA [Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan].”<sup>128</sup> First Lieutenant Zoe Bedell was the officer-in-charge of the FETs that arrived permanently in Afghanistan in 2010.<sup>129</sup> The FETs organized shuras for Afghan women to share their needs and so US forces to hear their perspectives.<sup>130</sup> These shuras offered a space for women in rural provinces to share the reality of their situation in regards to access to education, arranged marriages, and more. At shuras, Afghan women across rural provinces were asked to fill out a survey which provided U.S. and NATO forces an understanding of the differences between villages.<sup>131</sup> For example, in Kuz Kunar the average age for women to marry was 14, but in Shinwar, the average was only 12-years-old.<sup>132</sup> By listening to Afghan women, U.S. and NATO forces better understood what was necessary for reconstruction. The FETs gained new perspectives and information that American men could never obtain because of their gender, thus proving their value. Zoe Bedell’s experiences leading the FETs led her to advocate for the repeal of the Direct Ground Combat exclusion rule for women.<sup>133</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> “Women Warriors: The Ongoing Story of Integrating and Diversifying the American Armed Forces,” *Brookings*, May 7, 2020, accessed October 23, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/women-warriors-the-ongoing-story-of-integrating-and-diversifying-the-armed-forces/>.

<sup>128</sup> Zoe Bedell, “United States Marine Corps Female Engagement Team,” last modified May 2011, accessed October 13, 2021, [https://www.nato.int/issues/women\\_nato/meeting-records/2011/pdf/BEDELL\\_FETPresentation.pdf](https://www.nato.int/issues/women_nato/meeting-records/2011/pdf/BEDELL_FETPresentation.pdf).

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> “Female Shuras Uncover Hardships Facing Rural Afghan Women,” *U.S. Central Command*, accessed October 13, 2021, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/884446/female-shuras-uncover-hardships-facing-rural-afghan-women/>.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> “Zoe Bedell.”

### *Cultural Support Teams (CSTs)*

The Cultural Support Team enabled U.S. Special Operations combat forces to access and obtain intelligence in secure objectives. Their primary mission was to engage the Afghan female population on targeted objectives when that contact may be deemed culturally inappropriate if performed by a male service member.<sup>134</sup> *Ashley's War* by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon is the story about the training, deployment, and purpose of the first ever CST members.<sup>135</sup> The book honors CST 1LT Ashley White who was killed by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in Kandahar Province while serving alongside the U.S. Army's 75th Ranger Regiment.<sup>136</sup> The book shows the sisterhood that developed from training and experiencing the same things, especially as a group of high-performing women. Rarely in military non-fiction do we see a woman author writing about courageous women who were on the 'front lines' of combat. Lemmon says that her book is "not about policy or politics, but about purpose."<sup>137</sup> These CSTs were catalysts for not only American women in combat positions, but also Afghan women. The program's success provided evidence that helped repeal the ban on women in combat in 2015.

Former U.S. Army Captain Alex Horton was part of the first group of CSTs trained and attached to units in Afghanistan. After commissioning from ROTC as a Military Intelligence officer, Horton sought an opportunity that would allow her to serve in combat. She and her friend Rachel signed up to attend the first-ever selection process for the new Cultural Support Teams. At the time, Horton did not know what she was

---

<sup>134</sup> "Home," *Sisters Of Service*, accessed April 17, 2022, <https://sistersofservice.org/>.

<sup>135</sup> Ackerman, "When GI Jane Joined Special Ops."

<sup>136</sup> Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, *Ashley's War*, n.d.

<sup>137</sup> Ackerman, "When GI Jane Joined Special Ops."



getting into, but knew she liked being a part of a badass group of women. She deployed to Afghanistan six times and eventually became the program manager of the Cultural Support Teams.<sup>138</sup> One of the CSTs' missions was to train female Afghan enlistees, just as American male soldiers trained male Afghans. Inspired by the CST sisterhood, Horton went beyond the mission's requirements and piloted the Female Tactical Platoon program—the Afghan equivalent to the American CSTs.

When the U.S. withdrew forces in August 2021, Horton shared that she hoped her Afghan trainees and their families got out, but if not, “my hope is they fight back.”<sup>139</sup> Horton believes that what gave the enlistees their “level of determination and grit and fire” was their feeling of being “wanted and needed and respected and to never have had that before.”<sup>140</sup>



**Image 4** Captain Alex Horton (Center) with two trainees (*Daily Beast*)

American women were needed in Afghanistan. They proved their worth and helped pave the way for future servicewomen, but at a cost. During Operation Enduring

---

<sup>138</sup> Michael Daly, “How America’s G.I. Janes Trained Afghan Women to Fight the Taliban,” *The Daily Beast*, August 19, 2021, sec. us-news, accessed April 3, 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/army-capt-alex-horton-trained-afghan-women-to-fight-taliban>.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

Freedom, 51 servicewomen died, including three Marines and two CST members.<sup>141</sup> CSTs Ashley White and Jenny Moreno gave their lives in support of a higher mission; their courage and heroism remembered by their fellow CSTs. The stories of heroic American women are rarely told and almost always incomplete. *Ashley's War*, written by a woman, is one of the only books about American servicewomen that came out of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. In a sign of progress, *Ashley's War* is scheduled for production with Universal Studios into a movie, with the intention of more broadly sharing the courageous story of these glass-ceiling breaking soldiers.<sup>142</sup>

### **Afghan Soldiers**

Thousands of women joined the ranks in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) over the course of the U.S.-led war; however, the inclusion of women in the security sector was hardly effective in part because of existing cultural barriers. Recruiting Afghan women to join the security forces did not become a U.S. priority until 2010.<sup>143</sup> In May 2010, the Afghan ministries of the interior and defense committed to filling 10 percent of the ANDSF with women by 2020.<sup>144</sup> Then in January 2015, the NATO launched the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) to provide further training, advice and assistance for the Afghan Security forces. Additionally, the RSM

---

<sup>141</sup> “DCAS Reports - Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Military Deaths,” accessed October 23, 2021, [https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/report\\_oef\\_deaths.xhtml](https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/report_oef_deaths.xhtml).

<sup>142</sup> Justin Kroll, “‘Homeland’ Director Lesli Linka Glatter To Direct Adaptation Of ‘Ashley’s War’ For Universal; Molly Smith Metzler Penning Script,” *Deadline*, November 12, 2020, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://deadline.com/2020/11/homeland-director-lesli-linka-glatter-ashleys-war-universal-molly-smith-metzler-1234613600/>.

<sup>143</sup> Sopko, *Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

readjusted the 10 percent goal to 5,000 women in the army and 10,000 women in the police force by 2025.<sup>145</sup> By January 2020, women service members made up less than 1 percent of the Afghan National Army and only 3.25 percent of the Afghan National Police.<sup>146</sup> These numbers were well below the adjusted goals set by NATO and the U.S. for gender equality in the Afghan security forces. Afghan women who join the security sector encountered significant barriers for promotions and many of them struggled to even do their job descriptions.<sup>147</sup> While more women signed up for the ANDSF than ever before, the cultural stigmas against women serving did not fade away.

Women are unquestionably needed in the security sector to handle domestic violence cases, interview women militant suspects, and challenge societal assumptions. However, NATO goals to integrate women into the Afghan Security Forces failed not just on paper, but ended up hurting the women who served. Without proper channels for women to report sexual violence, and without integration programs for men, women were at the mercy of their male colleagues.<sup>148</sup> Without understanding the full cultural dynamics and risks for women's safety, the U.S. and NATO made benchmarks for gender inclusivity without the full consideration of Taliban and societal backlash.

The primary impediments that Afghan women faced joining the ANDSF were: 1) cultural norms, 2) physical safety, and 3) family opposition. NATO incentives to encourage women to join the ANDSF made women targets of their male colleagues and

---

<sup>145</sup> Sophia Jones, "The Many Dangers of Being an Afghan Woman in Uniform," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2018, sec. Magazine, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/magazine/afghanistan-women-security-forces.html>.

<sup>146</sup> Sopko, *Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*.

<sup>147</sup> Jones, "The Many Dangers of Being an Afghan Woman in Uniform."

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

their communities. Wazma Frogh, a senior advisor for the Afghan Ministry of Defense on women in security and human rights, noted that women who are rewarded by NATO for their determination are viewed as “darlings of the West.”<sup>149</sup> These sentiments further isolate women from their colleagues, especially without proper integration support for both men and women. Furthermore, women were often told by their male superiors that they should offer them sexual favors in exchange for promotions or raises—something not unfamiliar in other career fields.<sup>150</sup> Nonetheless, Afghan women served and made significant strides in an institution built for men. Their stories in the following section are outside the common narratives about Afghan women.

#### *Latifa and Laliuma Nabizada*

Latifa and Laliuma Nabizada were the first women admitted to the Afghan military flight school in 1989.<sup>151</sup> They were the only two girls out of 74 classmates in an environment extremely adverse to the inclusion of women in the military. The sisters even sewed their own flight suits. At first, the Afghan Airforce denied the sisters entry into flight schools because of their gender. However, they were determined and their glass-ceiling breaking achievements as the first women helicopter pilots in Afghanistan made them a target for the Taliban.

---

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Sally Sara, “Meet Afghanistan’s First Woman Military Helicopter Pilot,” *ABC News*, February 12, 2013, accessed October 11, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/specials/mama-asia/2013-02-12/latifa-nabizada-mama-asia-afghanistan/4489756>.

When the Taliban took power for the first time in 1996, they forced Latifa and Laliyuma to leave after a former colleague joined the Taliban and delivered the sisters a death threat. The sisters returned to Afghanistan in 2001, but still wore the burqa out of fear that the Taliban would retaliate. Coincidentally, the sisters became pregnant in 2006 at the same time after their parents arranged



*Image 5 Colonel Latifa was an active helicopter pilot in the Afghan Air Force (Billing)*

marriages for them. Laliyuma tragically died during childbirth as many Afghan women do. She was only 34-years-old. Latifa selflessly breastfed her sister’s daughter for the first few months of her life. “I looked after my sister's baby, I breastfed her. I was very sad and I was thinking a lot. It was quite difficult to feed them and look after them,” Latifa said. Reflecting on her sister’s passing, “I would cry sometimes and ask, how did this happen.”<sup>152</sup> Eventually, the strain of caring for two newborns was too much and Latifa’s mother looked after her niece. Only a few months after her sister’s passing, Latifa returned to her passion flying helicopters. However, the Afghan military does not provide childcare, so Latifa brought her baby daughter, Malalai, in the helicopter while she flew.<sup>153</sup> Not only was Latifa working as a pilot, but also as a mother with no other option

---

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

for her young daughter. When asked about the future of Afghanistan in 2013, Latifa stated, "After foreign forces go, if the government doesn't pay attention Afghan women will fall down again."<sup>154</sup> Latifa's story is not widely known because it is outside of the victim narrative told about Afghan women. There is no movie made about the heroism, dedication, and struggles that the first two women helicopter pilots in Afghanistan endured. Latifa and Laliyuma Nabizada are a huge inspiration and role model for not only other Afghan soldiers but for all women.

---

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

*Major Fatima Sadat*

Fatima Sadat is 27-years-old and was a major in the Afghan Armed forces.<sup>155</sup> Since she was a young girl, Sadat knew she wanted to serve in the military. “My dreams were a little bit different than other ladies and I wanted to be different from other ladies. I had dreams to become something, to serve my country, something that would benefit it — and I did that,” she says.<sup>156</sup> While the wars raged on, she found value in even the small tasks her commanders assigned her. In an interview, Major Sadat stated “When the men are wounded on the battlefield, or killed, who will be the one to fill out the reports? Who will take care of informing the families?



*Image 6 Major Fatima Sadat (ZORA)*

There are a lot of important things to deal with daily.”<sup>157</sup> Like Major Sadat, many women recruits hope to be deployed with combat support units, but they almost always assigned administrative duties in an office.

When outside the barracks, Sadat keeps her job a secret so as to avoid further persecution from her family and the Taliban. For simply doing her job, the Taliban sent a letter to her home that threatened: “you are working with the foreigners and you are trying to take the new generation of girls in other ways. They said wherever they see me, they

---

<sup>155</sup> Billing, “Female Afghan Soldiers Face a Battle on All Fronts.”

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

will do whatever they can.”<sup>158</sup> Despite the Taliban’s threat, Sadat was determined, “I am a military person but I will say that even if the Americans leave our country, we have been fighting for our country before they were here and we will still be fighting for our country after they leave.”<sup>159</sup> Sadat was adamant that her work will not be forgotten said, “I want my name to read, somewhere in America, that I am Commander Fatima Sadat of the officers academy.”<sup>160</sup>

---

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.



*Female Tactical Platoon (FTP)*



*Image 7 Female Tactical Platoon Members after training on the obstacle course (Politico)*

The Female Tactical Platoon, started in 2011, was an elite group of Afghan women who worked alongside special forces and accomplished what male soldiers could not do in a Muslim country—which included collecting information from women and children on high-risk missions.<sup>161</sup> The Americans wanted to create an Afghan program parallel to the CSTs so that when the U.S. withdrew its troops, there would be a team on

---

<sup>161</sup> “The Untold Story of the Afghan Women Who Hunted the Taliban,” accessed April 14, 2022, <https://politico.com/interactives/2022/afghan-women-soldiers-taliban-us-refugees/>.

the ground to continue the mission. By 2021, the platoon members conducted over two thousand missions.<sup>162</sup> Cultural Support Teams' members recruited and trained Afghan women for the FTP—at the recruiting sessions, only ten percent of the women who showed up would return.<sup>163</sup> But those who did were drawn to the chance to serve their country and prove what women could do, even in a conservative society and a male-dominated military.

U.S Army Major Laura Peters and her team selected a dozen recruits, who 1) had permission from their families to join 2) passed psychological and character screenings and 3) who seemed like they could learn to do a push up.<sup>164</sup> As the women learned to kick down doors and fast-rope out of a helicopter, they gained power. “I think, in a setting where they were together and encouraged to be a badass, it just brought up so much glee,” Peters recounted.<sup>165</sup> Soon after the FTP members started going on missions, male commanders actively requested their assistance because women could connect and build trust with targets. Their value to the Afghan and American forces was unquestionable. The former Platoon Commander said proudly, “There was a sense of purpose. We were trying to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a terrorist haven. We weren't just serving our country; we were serving the world.”<sup>166</sup>

American and Afghan women bonded over working in a hypermasculine profession, trying to make the world a safer place for women. Afghan women often

---

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

showed up to work wearing high heels, jewelry, and make-up. The American CST counterparts dubbed this “Afghan style.”<sup>167</sup> Although their style was unconventional, it was almost an act of defiance to be feminine in the military. The Female Tactical Platoon is not widely known in the U.S. military, and even among the Special Operations Command.<sup>168</sup> Their work and success were celebrated within a small group of elite women who worked together in a male-dominated space.

The Female Tactical Platoon violated everything that the Taliban believed women can and should do. When the U.S. began to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban hunted FTPs because of their gender, ethnicity, and association with U.S. forces.<sup>169</sup> American CSTs scrambled to help their Afghan sisters. All 39 members of the FTP evacuated in August 2021 and they are slowly adjusting to their new life in the United States.<sup>170</sup> Once all of them were safe, CSTs started an organization called Sisters of Service to help Platoon members with not only basic needs, but also emotional support. Adjusting as a refugee to a foreign country is an extremely difficult feat, but Sisters of Service offers opportunities for FTP members to connect and share their struggles. Nafisa said, “We started something important. And we lost everything, in a moment — the uniform, the power. The Taliban took our chance from us.”<sup>171</sup>

Mahjabeen (Majee) Hakimi, served as an FTP member, was killed on August 6, 2021 right before Kabul fell to the Taliban. She is remembered for her passion for

---

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> “Home.”

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> “The Untold Story of the Afghan Women Who Hunted the Taliban.”

women's rights and equality, enthusiasm for physical fitness, and her selfless service to Afghanistan and the United States.<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>172</sup> "Fallen Heroines," *Sisters Of Service*, n.d., accessed April 24, 2022, <https://sistersofservice.org/fallen-heroines/>.

## Sexual Assault in the Military

Sexual violence perpetrated by colleagues is a massive impediment to overall combat-readiness and persisted throughout the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. In both the Afghan and American militaries, women face high rates of gender-based violence for joining the ranks alongside men. While the U.S. military needs to adjust existing structures to prevent sexual violence, the Afghan military did not even have the institutions in place to change. Not only do women have to prove themselves but also defend themselves against their male colleagues.

In the Afghan Security Forces and Afghan Ministry of Defense, there were no sexual harassment and assault policies, let alone data collection, in place to protect women from sexual assault perpetrated by their colleagues.<sup>173</sup> As the ASNDF recruited more women, it did not create the structures needed to protect new soldiers. Major Sadat was naturally disappointed that she was unable to participate in off-base missions that she trained for, but recognized, “the enemy is not the only potential danger to a female recruit, surrounded by male soldiers on a remote outpost.”<sup>174</sup> Sadat says, “We don’t have men we can trust. In the battlefield you have to spend the night, so how can we guarantee that while a girl is out fighting, she won’t be assaulted?”<sup>175</sup> The culture surrounding women in the Afghan military is hostile and forces women to accept jobs below their training capabilities. Women who are viewed as threatening by their colleagues were punished with rumors of sexual impropriety.<sup>176</sup> Even if they avoided the rumors, women were told

---

<sup>173</sup> Jones, “The Many Dangers of Being an Afghan Woman in Uniform.”

<sup>174</sup> Billing, “Female Afghan Soldiers Face a Battle on All Fronts.”

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

they need to offer sexual favors to male superiors in exchange for raises or promotions.<sup>177</sup> The NATO/U.S. push for gender parity in the military did not take a gradual approach and in doing so, failed to recognize significant cultural barriers.<sup>178</sup> Afghan women made incredible strides in the military over the last two decades, but without institutional support or cultural acceptance, their progress on gender parity was capped. Afghan women's rights advocates argue that to improve gender-parity, a more effective approach would have been to emphasize community-led security reforms and encourage communities to support women in the defense forces.<sup>179</sup> Additionally, NATO and the ASNDF failed to develop procedures and institutions to report sexual violence and workplace misconduct, thus leading to more insecurity amongst women recruits.

Over the 20 years that the U.S. was in Afghanistan, women's progress in the U.S. military steadily improved. Attention to the widespread sexual violence is slowly improving as the rates of women in the military increase and as the culture shifts to include more women. Still, there is a long way to go before the military reached true gender equality. A meta-analysis of 69 studies published in 2018 in the journal *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*, estimated that one in four servicewoman report experiencing sexual assault and more than half report experiencing harassment in the U.S. military.<sup>180</sup> While each branch of the Armed Forces has their own reporting mechanism for sexual assault/harassment, many women do not feel comfortable coming forward. Out of 6,200 sexual-assault reports made in the fiscal year 2020, only 50 or 0.8 percent ended in sex-

---

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> “‘A Poison in the System’: The Epidemic of Military Sexual Assault - The New York Times,” accessed October 23, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/magazine/military-sexual-assault.html>.

offense convictions under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.<sup>181</sup> Furthermore, a 2018 Department of Defense survey showed that 38 percent of active-duty servicewomen who reported their assaults faced professional retaliation afterward.<sup>182</sup> These numbers lead to many service members leaving the military shortly after experiencing sexual trauma, not by choice. The Inspector General also concluded that the VA denied women military veterans who experienced Military Sexual Trauma (MST)—a type of PTSD—disability benefits 46 percent of the time.<sup>183</sup>

Women started their own organizations to cope with and support one another who not only experienced sexual trauma, but also the military failures to support them after the attack. The Service Women’s Action Network is an organization started and run by veteran service women to support one another. They showed agency and resiliency in fighting back against a system built for men in which their male counterparts failed them.

Women fought and died in the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan for the sake of a higher purpose. These women contradict the typical narratives told about (male) soldiers and demonstrate that women are capable of heroism too. The next section will look at a woman on the opposite side of the violence and how her story kept Taliban fighters at bay for decades.

## **Afghan Warlord**

---

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

Bibi Ayesha, also known as Commander Kaftar or “The Pigeon” is the only known woman warlord in Afghanistan. Commander Kaftar is from Narin district, Baghlan Province, Afghanistan and at one point claimed to command 150 men. While it is difficult to get information on Commander Kaftar because she is not widely written about, there are a few articles and interviews with the famed woman warlord. She built her reputation first fighting against the Soviet Occupation, then the Taliban regime in 1996-2001 and eventually the American-backed central government. Following in her father’s footsteps, Kaftar learned how to lead a community at young age and her

*Image 8 Commandar Kaftar with her granddaughter, bodyguard, and Nadera Nahrinwal (American Al-Jazeera)*





involvement in public life did not stop when she was married.<sup>184</sup> This is unconventional for an Afghan woman to remain prominent in her community after marriage, but her husband took on an unconventional role for men as well. During the wars, he stayed home with their seven children when his wife went into battle.<sup>185</sup>

When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and reached Baghlan Province, people looked to Kaftar for direction. In defense of her village, she told her soldiers, “If you get killed, you’ll be martyred, and if you kill them, you will be a hero.”<sup>186</sup> Kaftar often used her gender and her motherhood as an asset against enemies. On occasion, Kaftar felt

---

<sup>184</sup> Tom A. Peter, “A Woman’s War: The Rise and Fall of Afghanistan’s Female Warlord,” accessed March 28, 2022, <http://america.aljazeera.com/features/2014/4/commander-kaftarafemalewarlordinafghanistan.html>.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

more confident bringing her youngest daughter with her to ambush Russian troops than leaving her at home when she cried without her mother.<sup>187</sup> Her daughter also allowed Commander Kaftar to hide in plain sight as if she were an innocent mother. By carrying her crying daughter, she was able to evade questioning at a Russian checkpoint because they assumed a mother could not be a warrior.<sup>188</sup>

When the Taliban rose to power, the fighting continued between the mujahedeen and the Taliban. “When the fighting started and the attacks started, you didn’t care about anything. When they kill your family, you forget about everything, and you are thinking about revenge,” Kaftar said. “Three of my nephews got killed because of me, because of my orders, because they were in the Taliban, and I was a mujahedeen [who opposed the Taliban]. When clashes and enmity start, then you don’t care about feelings.” After fighting in so many wars, Commander Kaftar learned to deal with family disputes through violence and weapons. Kaftar defended her village against two Taliban incursions. In a standoff between a new Talib commander and Kaftar, he threatened, “I am Mullah Baqi and I will fuck your wife.” She fired back over the radio, “My husband will fuck your wife,” whilst revealing she was not just another male warlord. In a separate encounter, Commander Kaftar warned him, “If you come after me and do your operations in my valley, people will laugh at you if you arrest a woman. If you come to my valley and I arrest you, then it will be bad for you.”<sup>189</sup> Kaftar said that there was never a moment of peace under the Taliban.

---

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

In 2001, when the Americans arrived and the Taliban fell, northeast Afghanistan was a mess of insurgent groups governed by warlords.<sup>190</sup> In response, the United Nations initiated a program called Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) to disarm Afghanistan's warlords, including Commander Pigeon. It is unclear whether Commander Kaftar surrendered most of her weapons in 2006. In an BBC interview from 2006, Commander Kaftar stated "I am still wishing for a fight."<sup>191</sup> Her weapons were her main defense and source of power against the Taliban and local feuds. When asked about the Afghan government trying to disarm her she said, "If they come, you will see what I will do to the government."<sup>192</sup>

A few years later in 2014, Commander Kaftar was living in Kabul with her youngest granddaughter, awaiting the potential for the U.S. to completely withdraw from Afghanistan. She feared that if the Taliban returned, she would not be strong enough to resist. In 2014 profile, Jennifer Percy described Commander Pigeon as "an old decrepit warlord, a broken-down woman."<sup>193</sup> Somewhat belying that description, however, in an interview in 2015, Kaftar contended defiantly, "this war cannot be solved through peace deals. The solution to this war comes firstly from God and secondly from this beautiful

---

<sup>190</sup> Jennifer Percy, "My Terrifying Night With Afghanistan's Only Female Warlord," *The New Republic*, October 14, 2014, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/119772/my-night-afghanistans-only-female-warlord-commander-pigeon>.

<sup>191</sup> Coghlan, "Afghanistan's Feared Woman Warlord," March 16, 2006, accessed March 28, 2022, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/4806516.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4806516.stm).

<sup>192</sup> Mujib Mashal, Najim Rahim, and Fatima Faizi, "A Storied Female Warlord Surrenders, Taliban Say, Exposing Afghan Weakness," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2020, sec. World, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/18/world/asia/commander-pigeon-afghanistan-woman-commander.html>.

<sup>193</sup> Percy, "My Terrifying Night With Afghanistan's Only Female Warlord."

Kalashnikov [Russian automatic rifle], I don't believe that the Taliban will ever change or that this issue could be resolved through talks.”<sup>194</sup>

Today, Kaftar is about 70 years old and suffers from bad knees after decades of war. In 2020, the Taliban claim that she and her militia surrendered, but Commander Kaftar's son described it more as a truce.<sup>195</sup> While her surrender does little for the Taliban militarily, “they can use it as another propaganda victory against the struggling Afghan government.”<sup>196</sup> Reflecting on her time as a commander, Kaftar said, “I was proud of my career. But since I have been getting threats and I'm struggling and suffering, now I think I should not have become a commander.”<sup>197</sup> In a moment of regret, she admitted to herself, “I wish I would have been just a normal housewife. That no one would know me, no one would come to talk to me. Now I am sitting awake at night, always on guard, with a gun, ready to protect myself.”<sup>198</sup> A story like Commander Kaftar is almost hard to believe. It is incredibly rare to read stories of powerful Afghan women, let alone a woman warlord from a rural mountainous province.

---

<sup>194</sup> Afghanistan's Female Warlord, 2015, accessed March 30, 2022, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-female-warlord/27377111.html>.

<sup>195</sup> Mashal, Rahim, and Faizi, “A Storied Female Warlord Surrenders, Taliban Say, Exposing Afghan Weakness.”

<sup>196</sup> *Afghanistan's Female Warlord*.

<sup>197</sup> Peter, “A Woman's War.”

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 4: Women Involved Beyond the Fight

War is more than just the fighters. Mothers, activists and wives play a huge role in keeping life going. The next sections will look at the other sides of war and the women involved. Americans are familiar with the emotional airport homecomings of soldiers returning from a deployment. In the U.S., however, “the burden of war falls not just on the 1.3 million active-duty military personnel, but on their 1.6 family members.”<sup>199</sup> The patriotic images neglect the bigger picture of what it means to be the mother in charge of the household. In Afghanistan, mothers and wives are reduced to symbols and their struggles to care for children, often alone, are either overlooked or used as a symbol of desperation. These images place women as the face of the humanitarian crisis neglects the agency they do have in their own survival. The following section will look at the true stories of American and Afghan mothers. Because the circumstances of Afghan and American mothers are so different—Afghans living in a war-torn country and Americans living in a country absent of it—I will distinctly separate these stories because each mother’s experience is valid within each context.

### American Mothers

As Jen McDonald, a military spouse and author, put it, “[American] military families have borne the brunt of this safeguarding for the past two decades while the

---

<sup>199</sup> Nina Strohlic and Arin Yoon, “A Military Spouse Reflects on Life over Two Decades of War—and What Comes Next,” *History*, last modified September 10, 2021, accessed October 23, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/military-spouse-reflects-on-life-over-two-decades-of-war>.

majority of our country seemed unaware we were at war.”<sup>200</sup> Arin Yoon and Holly Hayden bring their personal experiences and stories to what it’s like to be a mother on one side of war.

*Arin Yoon*

Without any family military history, Arin Yoon stepped into a military lifestyle after marrying her husband, John, a sergeant in the U.S. Army stationed at Fort Irwin. As a former arts educator in Los Angeles, the shock of moving to a fully militarized community was a demanding adjustment. Moreover, Fort Irwin is home to the National Training Center (NTC), a hypermilitarized, pre-deployment base for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—NTC simulates war as closely as possible. In response to her new life as a military spouse, Arin processed this change through photography. In an article in *National Geographic*, Arin remembers googling “‘military spouse’ and ‘military families,’ and found a lot of patriotic imagery and stories of post-traumatic stress.”<sup>201</sup>

I interviewed Arin about her experience as a military spouse and why she started her photography project for herself and other military families. She spoke about the unique challenges of renavigating intimacy with a returned spouse and going on “first dates,” as well as re-establishing daily routines. Arin said that when her husband, John, is away “the routine without a spouse changes and it takes emotional, mental, and logical effort” to reshape their lives post-deployment. Thankfully, technology like FaceTime was a huge help with reintegration for her family and the reintegration period. Another frustration for

---

<sup>200</sup> “Afghanistan: One Military Spouse’s Perspective,” *Jen McDonald*, accessed October 23, 2021, <https://jen-mcdonald.com/show-notes/afghanistan-one-military-spouses-perspective>.

<sup>201</sup> Strohlic and Yoon, “A Military Spouse Reflects on Life over Two Decades of War—and What Comes Next.”

spouses is finding a job when they move every couple years, raising children alone, and often taking a job she was less qualified to do. Arin highlighted that, although life as a military spouse is no doubt challenging, the community and shared sense of purpose make it easier because “everyone understands what you’re going through.”<sup>202</sup> For example, when Arin was alone on Thanksgiving and did not feel like cooking, a neighbor brought over food without being prompted. At first, Arin used photography to cope with the adjustment to military life, but it slowly grew into something bigger. Arin emphasized that “homecomings do not show the whole story,” and hopes her photography can reshape the narratives around military families.

Arin photographs the moments in between the emotional departures and arrivals. To help others heal and cope with the struggles of military life, Arin started a community project titled *To Be At War*. The project’s mission is to “bridge the civil-military divide by examining the impact of war through first-person stories about military life and providing education, community, and healing.”<sup>203</sup> The project encourages family participation from spouses to children include photography spouses, children, mothers, etc. Arin organized a public art exhibition in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas to display all the beautiful photographs taken by the artists, while showing a new side of war. Photos have the power to show the small traumas, like FaceTime birthdays and hearing loss. The war in Afghanistan was particularly difficult to process because it felt like no one cared or remembered that about the war. In part, the goal of her photography was to share authentic families’ stories and show a different side of war. Many military members do not talk about their experiences,

---

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Arin Yoon, “To Be At War,” *To Be At War / Arin Yoon*, accessed October 23, 2021, <http://www.tobeatwar.com/about>.

including her husband, which made Arin feel isolated at times—something common for spouses.<sup>204</sup> But photography made her feel connected and she hopes to do the same for other military families.

### *Holly Hayden*

Holly is a current military spouse, mother, and former Military Intelligence Officer in the U.S. Army. After serving two deployments, she retired from the army to support her family in a different way. Holly’s husband, Daniel Hayden, remains on active duty and she is currently working to get her teacher’s license in California. During my interview with Holly, she seemed to miss military life, but felt thankful to still be a part of it in some way.

When Holly returned from her first deployment in Iraq, she was the only woman who helped form a new striker brigade. To survive, she had to be so careful and so good at what she did that there would be no question she could do the job. Her mindset was “I needed to be better than anybody expected of me.” Because of the male-billeted slots for combat roles, she received an exemption to be the Platoon Leader for a cavalry squadron. Even though the brigade commander believed in her and selected her as the Platoon Leader, her company commander stood firmly against women in combat roles. When her unit deployed to Afghanistan, Holly remained stateside and ran operations for the all-male striker brigade in Washington D.C. While no one treated her differently because of her

---

<sup>204</sup> Strohlic and Yoon, “A Military Spouse Reflects on Life over Two Decades of War—and What Comes Next.”



gender, she noticed shock whenever people realized she was the representative for a striker brigade.

Finding 'appropriate' friends and combating loneliness in a male-dominated space were the main constraints Holly faced during her service. One time, her unit tried to connect her with the spouses' group and they invited her to a coffee event. Despite her excitement to meet other women, it was clear that she had nothing in common with them. They talked about the army that they perceived through their husbands, whereas Holly was actually serving. It was a gendered assumption that she should hang out with the other women in the community, even though they were entirely different. She joined the military during a time when men and women were separated because of their assumed capabilities. Yet, Holly worked hard and proved that women are no less qualified because of their gender.

Although Holly retired as a Captain, she remains in the broader military community in a different, yet equally important role as a spouse. In Holly's opinion, it was easier for her to be a military spouse than for women who hadn't served because she had the hands-on experience to imagine what her husband's day-to-day was like. After retiring from the Army, it took Holly a long time before she developed relationships with other spouses. Deployments are a regular part of military families, but Holly coped with them differently because she understood what they entailed. She said, "I know that I have an equal part in this deployment. His is to do the army job and mine is to do this job back home." Her prior service made her less fearful and she turned her attention to her family. "My deployment operations are taking care of my family," she said. As soon as they say

goodbye at the airport, Holly asserted, “I am the commander of this little family.” She used her experience as a servicemember to shape her mindset when Dan was deployed.

### **Afghan Mothers**

While I was unable to directly connect with Afghan mothers, *The Other Side of War* by Zainab Salbi captures these women’s stories beautifully. In a society when baby boys are considered of higher social status than their mothers, finding and earning an income is extremely difficult. These situations force women to make hard choices. Some women disguise themselves as men, others turn to prostitution, and some must rely on family members. Motherhood is a part of many women’s lives, and for many it is a reason to survive. In most of these stories, “women rarely bother to specify in which war their loves ones died,” because there have been so many wars in Afghanistan.<sup>205</sup>

#### *Azada*

Azada was married to her cousin at 14, after her family fled the war as refugees in Pakistan. She was her husband’s third wife and he abused her whenever he came to town. Azada says, “I endured the cruelty of my husband because I didn’t have other choices.”<sup>206</sup> Thankfully, her father supported her decision to divorce and welcomed her and her daughters back into his house. Not all Afghan women are as fortunate when it comes to divorce. Eager to earn an income and support her daughters, Azada started weaving carpets for \$50 each finished carpet (that took about two to three months to weave). When the Taliban fell, her family returned to Kabul and she enrolled in gender-awareness

---

<sup>205</sup> Zainab Salbi et al., *The Other Side of War: Women’s Stories of Survival & Hope* (Washington D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006), 145.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

classes and learned to cut semi-precious stones. When her story was written, she was teaching other women stone-cutting, beadwork and design. She was most proud of her certificate of employment stating that “I never thought that one day I would have the opportunity to support myself without a man.”<sup>207</sup>

### *Noorzia*

When her story was written, Noorzia was 40-years-old and a mother of nine children. When the war that removed the Taliban ended in 2001, Noorzia and her family returned to Kabul after living in Pakistan and Iran as refugees. There was very little infrastructure left when they returned. Noorzia enrolled in business-training classes and took out a small loan to start a restaurant. “I started the restaurant for my family’s sake, but also to preserve our delicious Afghan food,” she said proudly, “I am a good cook.”<sup>208</sup> She and her husband hoped to turn the restaurant into a hotel for the poor. Noorzia and her husband found a way to earn an income in a city destroyed by war.

### *Habiba*

Habiba is a widowed mother of two daughters, Lida and Rashida. Her husband was killed by gunfire after they had been married only six years—he never met Rashida. With no income and no savings, Habiba walked through a desert for 24 hours to returned to her family’s village in the Kapisa region with her daughters. She lived with her brother-in-law, his wife, and their seven children, where they were dependent on his sole income. With the limited education she received, Habiba taught her daughters how to read and write. Habiba returned to Kabul when the Taliban fell after running from them

---

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid, 149.

for several years. Back in Kabul, Habiba and her two daughters moved in with her brother and contributed a small income by weaving carpets. Seeking a more substantial income, Habiba went to the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul and heard about Women for Women International, an NGO, where she could sign up for courses in business, marketing, and women's rights training. With her new skills, she applied for a position managing the Women for Women's store which is a market for women-run businesses. She proudly ran the store, kept the books, and chatted with customers. While her story is full of hardship, Habiba found a way to provide for her two daughters. Throughout decades of war, Habiba did what she could to make ends meet and support her children. Her daughters had big aspirations for the future—"Lida hopes to become an English teacher and Rashida wants to be a computer scientist."<sup>209</sup>

These mothers created agency by seeking opportunities to gain skills so they could provide for their children in a society that made it exponentially harder for women to work. Noorzia, Habiba, and Azada are resilient and resourceful women; they directly confront the narrative of "helpless Afghan women."

### **Sex Work and Domestic Violence**

When soldiers go off to war, women are typically the ones who stay behind and bear the brunt of the homemaking responsibilities. When men leave, women fill the gaps left by men off fighting wars. In addition to caring for children and the home, their work is unpaid so women often must find an income-source to make ends meet. All the while,

---

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 145.

women are left worrying about losing their fathers, partners, and sons to war. In a society that subordinates women to men, it leaves women stranded. When women are left in these positions, with no source of income, no husband, and children to care for, they often have little choice but to turn to sex work. Prostitution offers a reliable means of generating an income, especially for refugees who face significant barriers to employment. But it comes with risks of sexual violence and exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STI).<sup>210</sup> Additionally, the stigma and fear of repercussions that exists around sex work often prevent women from accessing support—even if this is their only means of income.<sup>211</sup> One thing is clear, poverty is the largest driver of prostitution.<sup>212</sup> As the economic conditions in Afghanistan unravel under the new Taliban regime, more and more women do not have a reliable income, forcing many into situations that come at great risk. While controversial and illegal in Afghanistan, sex work is a tactic that women use to support their families. In this way, women demonstrate agency in caring for their families, but often at the expense of their self.

Despite the assumption that there are no prostitutes in Afghanistan, women and men suffering from the costs of war and widespread poverty see prostitution as their last option.<sup>213</sup> While it is impossible to get an exact number on how many men and women sell sex in Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch documented that 95 percent of girls and 50

---

<sup>210</sup> Jennifer S. Rosenberg and Denis Bakomeza, “Let’s Talk about Sex Work in Humanitarian Settings: Piloting a Rights-Based Approach to Working with Refugee Women Selling Sex in Kampala,” *Reproductive Health Matters* 25, no. 51 (November 30, 2017): 95–102.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> Stefanie Glinski, “‘I’m Sacrificing Myself’: Agony of Kabul’s Secret Sex Workers,” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2021, sec. Global development, accessed April 3, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jun/14/im-sacrificing-myself-agony-of-kabuls-secret-sex-workers-afghanistan>.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

percent of women imprisoned in Afghanistan were accused of “moral crimes” including *zina*. “Moral crimes” include forced prostitution, kidnapping, rapes, beatings, and more.<sup>214</sup> Women either turn to sex work as a means to survive or they are forced into it by their relatives because it is a more dependable income source.

### *Zainab*

Zainab met her first client when she was 18-years-old.<sup>215</sup> After her father died, she dropped out of school to work as a full-time housekeeper to provide for her five younger siblings. However, when her younger brother became ill, she needed more than housekeeping could offer. “I was 13 years old when my father died. My mother had long been sick, and as the oldest, I had to take responsibility for my family. I started working as a housekeeper, but the money was never enough,” says Zainab in an interview with the Guardian.<sup>216</sup> Most of the men she works with are between the ages of 25 and 30 years old and married. From Zainab’s experience, she says, “They take 10 minutes, sometimes 20. Some use condoms, but not all of them do,” and expresses that “every time I’m alone in a room with a man, I am scared.”<sup>217</sup> As her family’s breadwinner without other options to financially support her family as a woman in the Taliban’s Afghanistan, Zainab says, “I’m sacrificing myself for my family.”<sup>218</sup>

---

<sup>214</sup> “Afghanistan: Surge in Women Jailed for ‘Moral Crimes,’” *Human Rights Watch*, May 21, 2013, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/21/afghanistan-surge-women-jailed-moral-crimes>.

<sup>215</sup> Glinski, “‘I’m Sacrificing Myself.’”

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Gender-based violence in Afghanistan*

About 87 percent of Afghan women and girls face abuse in their lifetime according to human rights watch.<sup>219</sup> Isobel Yeung, a VICE News journalist, visited Afghanistan after the Taliban retook power in 2022.<sup>220</sup> She interviewed several Afghan women, as well as members of the Taliban. Many of the brave women were forced to hide or make difficult choices because of the new power shift. Secretive shelters offering refuge for victims of domestic violence have appeared across Afghanistan. Mahbouba Seraj, a women's right activist, runs a safe house for women. Most shelters for survivors like Mahbouba's have closed. In conservative Afghan society, they view shelters as brothels for sinful women—even though they are places for women to escape abuse. “I do believe that 40 years of war in a country can really do some damage on the psyche of human beings,” said Mahbouba. These wars “brought about generations of very very very disturbed and violent men”<sup>221</sup> Yeung asked about Mahbouba's thoughts on the U.S. involvement in the name of women's rights. She responded, “International community left Afghan women the same way they left Afghanistan like a hot potato, burned their hands, dropped it. We've been dropped. They can't care less for the afghan women. They can't care less to what happened to the Afghan people.” Her hope is derived from brave and courageous women, “I'm counting on women.”

---

<sup>219</sup> “Women's Rights in Afghanistan Must Be Steadfastly Respected,” *Human Rights Watch*, March 20, 2014, accessed April 14, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/20/womens-rights-afghanistan-must-be-steadfastly-respected>.

<sup>220</sup> VICE News, *Life in the Taliban's Afghanistan*, 2022, accessed February 27, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFi\\_Rgm-T8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFi_Rgm-T8).

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

When prostitution remains illegal, women are at great risk of sexual and physical violence, as well as diseases. Not only that, but when they seek shelter, their safety is viewed as sinful. As the Taliban regained power across the country, they are cracking down on prostitution and anyone reported of it. Recent reports said the Taliban are making a “kill list” of Afghan sex workers for committing crimes.<sup>222</sup> Prior to the Taliban takeover, prostitution was illegal in Afghanistan; however, with no justice system in place for women, it is easier for them to be accused of crimes they did not commit. Furthermore, most women selling sex do so out of desperation and survival.

## **Activism**

### *The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan*

Afghan women bore the brunt of two occupations by the Soviets and the Americans, and yet, they fought back against oppression and violence for decades in Afghanistan. The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) was created in 1977 by Afghan women to fight for human rights and social justice in Afghanistan.<sup>223</sup> Unlike the Mujahedeen and the Taliban, RAWA is a *nonviolent* women-run organization that influences Afghans with ideas and education, not weapons. RAWA fights for women’s rights in multiple ways such as spreading democratic ideas in Afghanistan, educating rural and urban Afghan girls, and providing women with access to health care. Throughout decades of war, RAWA saw the consequences of violence and

---

<sup>222</sup> “Taliban Making ‘Kill List’ Of Afghan Sex Workers On Porn Sites: Report,” n.d., accessed April 3, 2022, <https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/afghan-sex-workers-taliban-kill-list-porn-sites-prostitutes/>.

<sup>223</sup> “About RAWA...,” accessed November 15, 2021, <http://www.rawa.org/rawa.html>.



firmly believes that “the Taliban and the al-Qaeda cannot be eradicated through military and financial might alone,” rather the war must be fought “on the ideological front too.”<sup>224</sup> Terrorism must be stopped from the roots, and RAWA maintains that to fight terrorism, the United States must not “give boys the reason, backing, incentive, for joining terrorist groups.”<sup>225</sup> The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan did not wait for American troops to save them or fight back, they were doing that already—just in a different way.

After the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Center, RAWA predicted that if the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, it would lead to a drawn-out, bloody conflict. Zoya, a RAWA member, wrote in her autobiography, “It was impossible for Washington to strike only bin Laden. Many innocent people would die first.”<sup>226</sup> Since its founding, RAWA highly disapproves of any occupation of Afghanistan and believe in the right to self-determination.<sup>227</sup> The organization firmly believes that “no power except the Afghan people themselves can or will succor them against fundamentalism, and there is no precedent in history wherein a foreign nation... have granted liberty to a nation held in thrall by those very same agents.”<sup>228</sup> In a RAWA Statement on International Women’s Day on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2002, the organization blamed the United States and NATO for

---

<sup>224</sup> RAWA, “Let Us Struggle Against War and Fundamentalism and for Peace and Democracy!” (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), March 8, 2002), <http://www.rawa.org/mar8-02en.htm>.

<sup>225</sup> Renee Bergen, *Sadaa e Zan: Voices of Women*, n.d.

<sup>226</sup> Follain and Cristofari, *Zoya’s Story: An Afghan Woman’s Struggle for Freedom*.

<sup>227</sup> RAWA, “Let Us Struggle Against War and Fundamentalism and for Peace and Democracy!”

<sup>228</sup> RAWA, “Afghan Women’s Fight for Freedom and Democracy Will Never Fail!,” *Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)*, October 7, 2021, <http://www.rawa.org/rawa/2021/10/07/afghan-women-s-fight-for-freedom-and-democracy-will-never-fail.html>.

turning Afghanistan into the most corrupt, insecure, and dangerous place, especially for women.<sup>229</sup> By arming infamous warlords in the North and supporting the Northern Alliance, RAWA said, the U.S. and NATO fueled the corruption throughout Afghanistan. Regardless of the situation in Afghanistan, RAWA and its members maintain steadfast against “misogynistic defamation.”<sup>230</sup>

*Zoya’s Story* by Zoya, John Follain, and Rita Cristofari is one of the rare stories told from the perspective of an Afghan woman and her experience working for RAWA throughout the decades of war in Afghanistan.<sup>231</sup> Zoya is the primary author’s self-given name to protect her from retaliation from the Taliban. Her mother was an active member of RAWA during the Soviet occupation and inspired Zoya to pursue a similar path. The Taliban took power for the first time when Zoya was 16 and shortly after sought to destroy women-run organizations like RAWA. The Taliban killed Zoya’s mother and father shortly after they first took power in 1996. Her grandmother stepped in as Zoya’s caregiver, and together they fled to Pakistan where Zoya’s grandmother ensured that Zoya was educated at one of RAWA’s schools.<sup>232</sup>

Zoya’s male cousin offered her the opportunity to leave Afghanistan and migrate to Canada claiming “it was useless to try to change things in Afghanistan.”<sup>233</sup> Inspired by her teachers and classmates, however, Zoya chose to stay to fight for her country. As one of her first assignments for RAWA, Zoya wrote articles on Afghan events for Payam-e-

---

<sup>229</sup> RAWA, “Let Us Struggle Against War and Fundamentalism and for Peace and Democracy!”

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Follain and Cristofari, *Zoya’s Story: An Afghan Woman’s Struggle for Freedom*.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Zoya, John Follain, and Rita Cristofari, *Zoya’s Story: An Afghan Woman’s Struggle for Freedom*, First. (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 77.

Zan (Women's Message), a magazine that the association started a dozen years earlier."<sup>234</sup>

Later, Zoya joined the Foreign Affairs Committee of RAWA and travelled around the world advocating for women's rights in Afghanistan. She emphasized that "waging war does not bring liberation and democracy for our people." In a 2009 interview with Grit TV, Zoya said, "I think eight years is quite enough time to prove that the United States was not able to stop these operations [throwing acid in the face of girls who went to school] and these crimes [rape and looting]." Zoya traced the initial failures in Afghanistan to when the U.S. financially supported the Northern Alliance to fight the Taliban. Zoya argued that if the United States wanted to help Afghanistan, it needed a non-violent, non-bloody alternative to fighting the Taliban. According to Zoya and RAWA, there was no difference between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, "they both are terrorists." If the U.S. wanted to contribute and help "liberate women" as First Lady Laura Bush claimed, they needed to focus on all 34 provinces and, specifically, educating and assuring the parents who do not want to send their children to school.

Afghan Women's Mission is an American-based NGO that works closely with RAWA by fundraising and organizing on the U.S. side. Afghan Women's Mission was founded by a small group of Americans in 2000 to provide medical assistance to Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. However, the organization evolved as the war did. Some of their projects include Afghan women-run programs including the Malalai Clinic, schools, orphanages, agricultural programs, demonstrations, and other functions in support

---

<sup>234</sup> Ibid, 83.

women's and human rights."<sup>235</sup> *Zoya's Story* and *Sadaa e Zan*, along with several other products, were produced in collaboration with the Afghan Women's Mission and RAWA. In this case, Afghan and American women worked together to raise awareness, funding, and opportunities for women in Afghanistan.

RAWA, in collaboration with the Afghan Women's Mission, filmed a short documentary in March 2002, featuring the thoughts and opinions of Afghan Women. *Sadaa e Zan* (Voices of Women) collects the voices of several women living in Kabul, Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan.<sup>236</sup> About fifty percent of the women are widows and nearly everyone lost a family member from either the Taliban's regime or the American invasion.<sup>237</sup> A RAWA spokeswoman asserted that, "Unless all the weapons are collected and these groups are disarmed, there will be no security in Afghanistan." Many of the women interviewed criticized "American bombardments" because they caused more insecurity for Afghans and halted foreign aid from entering the country. One woman responded that, without access to foreign aid, "those who had a man survived. He could go work in Pakistan, but those who didn't starved." Despite the war and potential famine, thousands of women found a way to survive for their children and their communities, even in the wake of psychological trauma.

While the Taliban controlled Afghanistan the first time, women secretly homeschooled about fifty percent of girls. They taught classes of over 300 girls in a four-bedroom house, with only thirteen teachers for all of them. Most of them did not have

---

<sup>235</sup> "Afghan Women's Mission A Project Of Social And Environmental Entrepreneurs," *About Us*, last modified 2017 2000, <https://www.afghanwomensmission.org/about/>.

<sup>236</sup> "Sadaa E Zan (Voices of Women) : Afghan Women's Mission," n.d., accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.afghanwomensmission.org/2003/11/sadaa-e-zan-voices-of-women/>.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

chairs or tables for the girls, and they had to leave their backpacks at school for their protection. Even when schools were discovered and shut down by the Taliban, they reopened a few days later at a new location. While the Taliban made it extremely hard for women to operate in Afghanistan, women did so nonetheless. One important thing to remember is that this film interviewed women in the capital city; in the rural provinces, neither girls nor boys had the same opportunities to attend secret classes. On International Women's Day in 2002, one woman said, "You should see the courage of the Afghan woman. If they could work in that situation, they can work now."

RAWA is a group of courageous, heroic women who outlasted decades of violent insurgent groups, but does not garner enough attention for a Hollywood blockbuster. Because the U.S. media rarely focused on the actions of Afghan women who defended themselves, RAWA shot a film interviewing women affected by the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. Zoya's friend, Meena, termed the women of Afghanistan 'sleeping lions' "who would become powerful when they finally awoke."<sup>238</sup>

---

<sup>238</sup> Follain and Cristofari, *Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom*, 85.

## Art and Artists

Artwork is not only a powerful tool of protest, but also a way of expressing emotions that are hard to share. In a country that limited women's voices under Taliban rule, empowerment took many forms. Women artists in Afghanistan used street murals to provoke people and transform the city into a beautiful place despite the endless wars and violence. Unfortunately, when the Taliban took over the city in August 2021, Afghan artists, especially women, were in grave danger of being targeted.



*Image 9 Tweet regarding Taliban white washing murals in Kabul (Twitter)*

Shamsia Hassani is an Afghan graffiti artist and art professor at Kabul University. She wields her artwork as an expression of women's empowerment and protest to the Taliban's oppressive regime.<sup>239</sup> Hassani grew up as an Afghan refugee in Iran and

<sup>239</sup> "Shamsia Hassani - Official Website," accessed October 11, 2021, <https://www.shamsiahassani.net/>.



returned to Afghanistan in 2001 when the Taliban fell.<sup>240</sup> Shamsia Hassani’s artwork provokes ideas of social change, empowerment, and peace—ideas that left her in danger when the Taliban regained power in August 2021.

ArtLords was

established in 2014 to employ

the soft power of art and culture to transform Afghanistan and promote peace throughout the country using a non-intrusive approach.<sup>241</sup> Negina Azimi is an artist who works with *Image 10 Shamsia Hassani Mural (official website)*

ArtLords, a well-known artist

group in Kabul that created an initiative of painting murals on thick concrete anti-blast walls around the capital.<sup>242</sup> These murals intended to spark social change and included paintings ranging from a portrait American George Floyd to the Doha Deal.<sup>243</sup> Azimi

<sup>240</sup> Ruchi Kumar, “‘We Planted a Seed’: The Afghan Artists Who Painted for Freedom,” *The Guardian*, October 23, 2021, sec. Global development, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/oct/23/we-planted-a-seed-the-afghan-artists-who-painted-for-freedom>.

<sup>241</sup> “About Us,” *ArtLords*, n.d., accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.artlords.co/about-us/>.

<sup>242</sup> Kumar, “‘We Planted a Seed.’”

<sup>243</sup> Akhtar Mohammad Makoi, “‘The Soul of Kabul’: Taliban Paint over Murals with Victory Slogans,” *The Guardian* (Islamabad, September 7, 2021), sec. World news, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/07/the-soul-of-kabul-taliban-paint-over-murals-with-victory-slogans>.

made it onto an evacuation flight with her fellow artists, escaping the Taliban’s wrath for their controversial artwork.<sup>244</sup>



Since the Taliban takeover, hundreds of murals created by these Afghan artists around the streets of Kabul are being whitewashed by the Taliban who are painting over their murals with victory slogans.<sup>245</sup> Hassani spoke out on her discouragement when the Taliban took over saying, “I used to believe that art is stronger than war, but now I realize that war is stronger, and everything we built over 20 years could be destroyed within minutes by its darkness.”<sup>246</sup>

*Image 11 Shamsia Hassani posing with one of her murals (official website)*

### **Non-Governmental Organizations**

Over the last 20 years, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) served millions of Afghans who needed food, medical assistance, shelter, and other basic needs. Contrary to the ‘helpless victim’ narrative, Afghan women worked for international NGOs and started their own.

Several NGOs employed Afghan women so that they earned an income and learn new skills when there were few jobs available. Some organizations even offered classes on

---

<sup>244</sup> Kumar, “‘We Planted a Seed.’”

<sup>245</sup> Makoi, “‘The Soul of Kabul.’”

<sup>246</sup> Kumar, “‘We Planted a Seed.’”



business ownership and gender-based violence to challenge existing cultural norms.

American and Afghan women helped organize, start, and run NGOs that were part of the war effort that go unrecognized. The following section will look at women who ran NGOs during the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan.

### *Afghan Women's Network (AWN)*

The Afghan Women's Network (AWN) was founded by seven Afghan women in 1996 who decided to empower Afghan women and ensure their equal participation in Afghan society.<sup>247</sup> Today, AWN has 72 organizations and 3000 individuals and has members in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>248</sup> Noorzia Safi is the director of Women's Capacity Building and Development and a board member of the Afghan Women's Network.<sup>249</sup> She works on human rights issues in Kunduz province, which fell to the Taliban three times. Her work with AWN is not without risk—she received beatings and death threats from the Taliban, on top of the uphill battle changing Afghan society. Despite that challenges, she tries to change as many lives as she can for the better.

On February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Noorzia Safi and 124 others from the AWN sent an open letter to the Biden Administration criticizing the diversion of Afghan foreign aid for the payments to families of victims of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.<sup>250</sup> The statement reads, “As women, we do understand the hurt and sorrow experienced by each family member of the victims of September 11. However, we are sure they will not be healed or appreciate one penny of Afghan money when the men and women of Afghanistan feel they are being forced to sell one child to feed another because of life-threatening

---

<sup>247</sup> “Afghan Women's Network,” accessed April 18, 2022, <http://www.afghanwomensnetwork.org/>.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> “Meet 16 Brave Women Human Rights Defenders from Afghanistan,” Amnesty International, November 25, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/16-days-of-activism-afghanistan-whrds/>.

<sup>250</sup> “Women's Refugee Commission Stands in Solidarity with Afghan Women Leaders in Wake of Biden Asset Announcement,” Women's Refugee Commission, n.d., accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/press-releases/womens-refugee-commission-stands-in-solidarity-with-afghan-women-leaders-in-wake-of-biden-asset-announcement/>.

poverty.”<sup>251</sup> In a country evolving into the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, the Afghan Women’s Network argues that they need all the funds they can get to help Afghan’s cope with the widespread insecurity. Noorzia Safi is an example of someone who leveraged her network of women to help others, even if it means putting her own life in danger.

### *Women for Women International*

Women for Women International is an international NGO that invests in women survivors of war and conflict by connecting them with each other, resources, and support to help women realize their power.<sup>252</sup> WfWI implements a Gendered Graduation Approach by providing women in conflict-affect states with a 12-month intervention that focuses both on empowerment and economic pathways to increase self-sufficiency.<sup>253</sup> The organization starts by identifying women in need and then tailors their program to meet women where they are at.<sup>254</sup> Women for Women International (WfWI) resumed operations in Afghanistan in December 2021. Even though international aid is still frozen and banks do not have cash, WfWI is adapting to the needs and constraints of the current situation. In response the growing crisis, WfWI asks Afghan women what they need and respond from there. For instance, food insecurity is widespread and worsening right now, so WfWI responded by providing chickens and supplies to start kitchen gardens. Along with supporting their basic needs, WfWI provides psychological first aid training to

---

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> “Our Approach | Women for Women International,” accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.womenforwomen.org/our-approach>.

<sup>253</sup> “Gendered Graduation Approach,” last modified 2021, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.womenforwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/GenderedApproach2021.pdf>.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

women in their programs by organizing group phone calls so women can connect with each other. While there is no perfect solution, Women for Women International listens to survivors and figures out what Afghan women need in the current environment.

Latifa Faqirzada worked four years as Advocacy Coordinator in Afghanistan for Women for Women International. She became the first woman in her family to earn a degree in law from the University of Kabul. Latifa became self-sufficient and used her education to help women survivors of war rebuild their lives.<sup>255</sup> Her work with WfWI helped lift other women up and even survive in some instances. When U.S. troops withdrew, Latifa evacuated in August 2021 and is now living as refugee in London.



*Image 12 Latifa Faqirzada holding a sign about removing women from society*

---

<sup>255</sup> Latifa Faqirzada, "Please Don't Forget Afghanistan | Women for Women International," December 20, 2021, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.womenforwomen.org/blogs/please-dont-forget-afghanistan>.

The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating rapidly after decades of war. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) warns that starvation could kill more Afghans this year (in 2022) than in the last twenty years of war.<sup>256</sup> In a February 2015 statement, the IRC reported that 24.4 million people need humanitarian aid and over one million children are at risk of severe malnutrition.<sup>257</sup> Expectant mothers and new-born babies lack a reliable food supply after the recent Taliban takeover. Vicki Aken is the International Rescue Committee's Afghanistan Director who stayed behind during U.S. evacuations to help people on the ground. She says, "Who is running the country right now has nothing to do with the majority of people inside of Afghanistan, has nothing to do with half the population that are women and children that had no say in this and that are suffering right now."<sup>258</sup> Seven out of eight NGO directors who stayed in country to lead their organization's aid efforts when the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan were women.<sup>259</sup> The Taliban's inability to provide reliable security for NGOs and aid organizations left them only able to continue their usual activities in four of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.<sup>260</sup> Moreover, the Taliban visited nonprofit organizations demanding lists of staff members and assets—a violation that makes it even harder to hire Afghans and operate in country.

---

<sup>256</sup> "Afghanistan," International Rescue Committee (IRC), accessed April 17, 2022, <https://www.rescue.org/country/afghanistan>.

<sup>257</sup> "Six Months on from Change in Power, IRC Warns Starvation Could Kill More Afghans than Last Twenty Years of War as 97 per Cent of Population Faces Poverty," International Rescue Committee (IRC), last modified February 15, 2022, accessed April 17, 2022, <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/six-months-change-power-irc-warns-starvation-could-kill-more-afghans-last-twenty-years>.

<sup>258</sup> Carlotta Gall, "Aid Workers Staying in Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan Tread a Tricky Path," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2021, sec. World, accessed October 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/08/world/asia/afghanistan-aid-workers-taliban.html>.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

In the aftermath of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, many women were left behind to fight for their own survival. Humanitarian needs in Afghanistan have tripled since June 2021 with 97 percent of Afghans living below the poverty line.<sup>261</sup> For Afghans who had no other option, the U.S. withdrawal exacerbated the economic issues persisting in the country. When the Americans left, most Afghans, who were unable to leave, are left without access to food, clean water, or medical treatment. All this on top of the unclear policies of the new Taliban regime regarding girls' education and fear of violent retribution. Another famine looms with an ongoing drought and most NGOs are unable to reach the majority of rural provinces in Afghanistan out of security concerns. As of March 15, 2022, 95 percent of Afghans currently do not have enough to eat, with the number rising to almost 100 percent in women-headed households.<sup>262</sup> Additionally, the UN reports that "acute malnutrition in 28 out of the 34 provinces are high with more than 3.5 million children in need of nutrition support."<sup>263</sup> While the situation appears hopeless, understandably, women are still doing everything they can to survive.

### *Farhat Popal*

Farhat Popal is an Afghan American who grew up hearing stories of Afghanistan prior to the Soviet invasion. Her parents and grandparents told stories of normal human leisure activities, like going to the movies and building a beautiful house with orchards.

---

<sup>261</sup> "97 Percent of Afghans Could Plunge into Poverty by Mid 2022, Says UNDP | United Nations Development Programme," UNDP, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.undp.org/press-releases/97-percent-afghans-could-plunge-poverty-mid-2022-says-undp>.

<sup>262</sup> Humanitarian Aid, "Afghanistan: Food Insecurity and Malnutrition Threaten 'an Entire Generation,'" UN News, last modified March 15, 2022, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113982>.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

Her aunts and uncles served in numerous professions, including as teachers, soldiers, and artists. After hearing what Afghanistan was in a previous life and looking at what it had become, Farhat felt a sense of responsibility to do Afghanistan-related work. Throughout the U.S.-led war, she worked in Afghanistan in several ways, trying to help Afghanistan in whatever ways she could. Farhat worked for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) where she conducted performance auditing on U.S.-funded projects throughout the country.

Eventually, Farhat decided she wanted to help on the front end of some of these development projects that she evaluated in Afghanistan. She found a job as a contractor for the U.S. State Department, specifically working on Afghanistan. Her experience on the ground in Kabul, working at the embassy, provided her with the necessary skills to develop programs that would address needs from the human end.

Farhat's mother's and grandmother's stories of their experiences shaped how Farhat looked at human rights and specifically, access challenges that women still face in Afghanistan. Education is a huge area of development for all of Afghanistan. Farhat works to explain to people that women's rights are not western-imposed ideas, but that they are inherent in Islam. Farhat helped develop programs that would help foster those types of conversations and discussions with both women and men were really important. Her work to reframe the idea of women's rights is an example of working from the inside out on changing a society's mindset.

Farhat emphasized the internal sense of responsibility that keeps her going. Her family resettled in the U.S., and she hopes to use her educational opportunities and work experiences to support Afghanistan in whatever ways she can. In her own words, when it

comes to rebuilding and reconstructing Afghanistan, her motivation lies with providing “the next generation of Afghans [with] as much opportunity as possible [so they can] thrive in their lives.”

Many of the women who fled Afghanistan did not do so by choice, but out of fear that the Taliban would retaliate for their involvement with the U.S. military or because their profession was not acceptable in the eyes of the Taliban. Many Afghan women went from being soldiers and artists to refugees overnight. In the U.S., thousands of Afghan refugees are in the process of resettling. California accepted more Afghan refugees than any other state. After working as the San Diego immigrant affairs manager, and helping thousands of refugees with the resettlement process, Farhat highlighted how stressful the process can be. When refugees arrive in the United States, they receive three months of financial support to help them get on their feet; however, this short allocation of financial support neglects the all-encompassing struggles that refugees face. When people flee conflict zones, they often leave with only the clothes on their back and then must restart their lives from nothing. Already traumatized Afghans must try to adapt to American culture and develop financial independence as quickly as possible because the services they receive upon arriving in the US are short-lived and fall short of what they need to survive, much less thrive.

The last nine months were particularly challenging for Farhat, and she noted that lots of veterans, aid-workers, diplomats, and people in the Afghan American community also feel hopeless after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Today, Afghans barely have enough to eat and access to opportunities is peripheral to immediate survival. Farhat asserted that the manner in which the U.S. withdrew troops contributed to the massive



and widespread humanitarian crisis. “We have to accept the moral responsibility of the consequences of that,” she said. For Farhat, it is a hard thing to grapple with and keep charging forward in her work. As the entire landscape of Afghanistan changes, it is hard to figure out where to start. Farhat’s work in Afghanistan is far from over, but she acknowledged that she needs to recharge.

These stories in this chapter demonstrate the women at the forefront of the fallout of war. Women asserted agency and contributed to the war, in ways that went largely unacknowledged in mainstream narratives about Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

War narratives tend to rely on gender-based hierarchical structures that place stereotypical masculine roles, such as soldiers, ahead of more feminized roles, like mothers. Men are portrayed as the decisionmakers, military leaders, soldiers, political leaders, and enemies. War historian John Keegan explicitly stated that women were best excluded from war narratives. But, in reality, women are everywhere in war, from the battlefield to the industrial plants to the home front. War cannot function without women to keep society going, to keep economies running, to keep soldiers kitted and fit and healthy, to serve, themselves, whether on the frontlines or in backrooms. This has been just as true throughout decades of war in Afghanistan. Afghan women resisted, challenged, and fought back against the Soviets, warlords, and the Taliban. American women serving in the US military proved their value in Afghanistan time and again as well, while also beginning much needed changes in the military itself.

On August 30, 2021, the United States withdrew all troops and military presence from Afghanistan. The hasty evacuation of the country came days after the Taliban retook Kabul after twenty years of operating on the fringes of the American-backed Afghan government. While the U.S. successfully helped Afghans with connections to the U.S. government flee the country, by no means did they help everyone. President Biden said in speech days after the withdrawal, “There’s nothing low grade or low risk or low cost about any war.”<sup>264</sup> However, the highest cost falls on the Afghan people and on

---

<sup>264</sup> Michael D. Shear and Jim Tankersley, “Biden Defends Afghan Pullout and Declares an End to Nation-Building,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 2021, sec. U.S., accessed April 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/us/politics/biden-defends-afghanistan-withdrawal.html>.

women in particular, who bear the burden of the aftermath of war for decades to come. While women made significant strides in Afghan public service, military service, education, and more over the last twenty years, the persistence of Afghanistan's conservative society will have long-term consequences on their options and the Taliban's ascendance has and will continue to set Afghan women back.

Sadly, but predictably, the war in Afghanistan did little to shift women's role in most of Afghan society. When asked in 2021 if he thought his daughter deserves equal rights when she grows up, Taliban spokesperson, Zabiullah Mujahid, firmly responded, "No. There are laws for women and laws for men. We don't have 50/50 equal rule."<sup>265</sup> Part of the US's failure to change Afghans' "hearts and minds" with respect to women's rights was rooted in its outside-in approach; it did not rely on the women already trying to reshape extremist ideology like the Afghan women working with RAWA, or the ones serving as teachers and activists. Afghan and American women made significant strides to prove that they contribute in male-dominated spaces, yet their accomplishments continue to be undervalued and undermined.

Stories about war must include women, not just as peripheral actors, but as main characters. Conventional war narratives offer only a partial picture of the realities of war. The U.S.-led war in Afghanistan included thousands of women – Afghan, American, and other - in a multiplicity of roles. While this thesis cannot mention all the women involved in this war, it offers glimpses into the reality of women's experiences in war. Without telling the stories of women, it is impossible to understand the full extent of war. While

---

<sup>265</sup> VICE News, *Life in the Taliban's Afghanistan*.

most war narratives focus on men, this thesis shines light on women's active and consequential roles during the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. The world needs more war stories where women are the main character.

## Bibliography

- Ackerman, Xanthe. "When GI Jane Joined Special Ops." *The Daily Beast*, June 17, 2015. Accessed April 4, 2022. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/17/when-gi-jane-joined-special-ops>.
- Anonymous. *A Woman in Berlin*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005.
- Asey, Tamim. "The Price of Inequality: The Dangerous Rural-Urban Divide in Afghanistan." *Global Security Review*, March 5, 2019. Accessed April 19, 2022. <https://globalsecurityreview.com/inequality-dangerous-rural-urban-divide-afghanistan/>.
- Bedell, Zoe. "United States Marine Corps Female Engagement Team." Last modified May 2011. Accessed October 13, 2021. [https://www.nato.int/issues/women\\_nato/meeting-records/2011/pdf/BEDELL\\_FETPresentation.pdf](https://www.nato.int/issues/women_nato/meeting-records/2011/pdf/BEDELL_FETPresentation.pdf).
- Bergen, Renee. *Sadaa e Zan: Voices of Women*, n.d.
- Billing, Lynzy. "Female Afghan Soldiers Face a Battle on All Fronts." *ZORA*, October 2, 2019. Accessed October 11, 2021. <https://zora.medium.com/female-afghan-soldiers-face-a-battle-on-all-fronts-ac78722326a1>.
- Carpenter, R. Charli, Professor Pauline Gardiner Barber, Professor Marianne H Marchand, and Professor Jane Parpart. "*Innocent Women and Children*": *Gender, Norms and the Protection of Civilians*. Farnham, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006. Accessed December 7, 2021. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=429673>.
- Coghlan. "Afghanistan's Feared Woman Warlord," March 16, 2006. Accessed March 28, 2022. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/4806516.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4806516.stm).
- Daly, Michael. "How America's G.I. Janes Trained Afghan Women to Fight the Taliban." *The Daily Beast*, August 19, 2021, sec. us-news. Accessed April 3, 2022. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/army-capt-alex-horton-trained-afghan-women-to-fight-taliban>.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Women and War*. New York : Basic Books, 1987. Accessed March 25, 2022. [http://archive.org/details/isbn\\_9780465092161](http://archive.org/details/isbn_9780465092161).
- Enloe, Cynthia. "Does Khaki Become You?" *New Internationalist*. Last modified July 5, 1991. Accessed March 30, 2021. <https://newint.org/features/1991/07/05/khaki>.

- . “Gender Makes the World Go Round: Where Are the Women?” In *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. London, England: University of California Press, 2014.
- Faqirzada, Latifa. “Please Don’t Forget Afghanistan | Women for Women International,” December 20, 2021. Accessed April 19, 2022. <https://www.womenforwomen.org/blogs/please-dont-forget-afghanistan>.
- Friedersdorf, Conor. “Under Obama, Men Killed by Drones Are Presumed to Be Terrorists.” *The Atlantic*. Last modified May 29, 2012. Accessed March 28, 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/05/under-obama-men-killed-by-drones-are-presumed-to-be-terrorists/257749/>.
- Gall, Carlotta. “Aid Workers Staying in Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan Tread a Tricky Path.” *The New York Times*, September 8, 2021, sec. World. Accessed October 12, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/08/world/asia/afghanistan-aid-workers-taliban.html>.
- Glinski, Stefanie. “‘I’m Sacrificing Myself’: Agony of Kabul’s Secret Sex Workers.” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2021, sec. Global development. Accessed April 3, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jun/14/im-sacrificing-myself-agony-of-kabuls-secret-sex-workers-afghanistan>.
- Graham-Harrison, Emma. “Armed Afghan Women Take to Streets in Show of Defiance against Taliban.” *The Guardian*, July 7, 2021, sec. World news. Accessed March 24, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/07/armed-afghan-women-take-to-streets-in-show-of-defiance-against-taliban>.
- Hammer, Lucia, and Marina Elefante. *Achieving Universal Access to ID: Gender-Based Legal Barriers Against Women and Good Practice Reforms*. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2019. Accessed February 21, 2022. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/32474/Achieving-Universal-Access-to-ID-Gender-based-Legal-Barriers-Against-Women-and-Good-Practice-Reforms.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>.
- Harrell, Margaret C., Laura Werber, Peter Schirmer, Bryan W. Hallmark, Jennifer Kavanagh, Daniel Gershwin, and Paul S. Steinberg. *Assessing the Assignment Policy for Army Women*. RAND Corporation, April 28, 2007. Accessed April 20, 2022. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG590-1.html>.
- Humanitarian Aid. “Afghanistan: Food Insecurity and Malnutrition Threaten ‘an Entire Generation.’” *UN News*. Last modified March 15, 2022. Accessed April 19, 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113982>.
- Jones, Sophia. “The Many Dangers of Being an Afghan Woman in Uniform.” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2018, sec. Magazine. Accessed March 20, 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/magazine/afghanistan-women-security-forces.html>.

Kalinowski, Mariette. “‘Slut, Bitch, Dyke’—Joan of Arc and the Modern Military Woman.” *The Daily Beast*, August 21, 2013. Accessed March 2, 2022.  
<https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/08/21/slut-bitch-dyke-joan-of-arc-and-the-modern-military-woman>.

Kamarck, Kristy N. *Women in Combat: Issues for Congress*. Congressional Research Service, December 13, 2016. Accessed April 18, 2022.  
<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R42075.pdf>.

Keegan, John. *A History of Warfare*. New York : Alfred A. Knopf : Distributed by Random House, Inc., 1993. Accessed March 2, 2022.  
[http://archive.org/details/historyofwarfare0000keeg\\_v5i8](http://archive.org/details/historyofwarfare0000keeg_v5i8).

Kroll, Justin. “‘Homeland’ Director Lesli Linka Glatter To Direct Adaptation Of ‘Ashley’s War’ For Universal; Molly Smith Metzler Penning Script.” *Deadline*, November 12, 2020. Accessed April 20, 2022.  
<https://deadline.com/2020/11/homeland-director-lesli-linka-glatter-ashleys-war-universal-molly-smith-metzler-1234613600/>.

Kumar, Ruchi. “‘We Planted a Seed’: The Afghan Artists Who Painted for Freedom.” *The Guardian*, October 23, 2021, sec. Global development. Accessed November 15, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/oct/23/we-planted-a-seed-the-afghan-artists-who-painted-for-freedom>.

Leisa D. Meyer. *Creating GI Jane*. Columbia University Press, 1996. Accessed March 7, 2022. <http://archive.org/details/creatinggijapanese00meye>.

Lemmon, Gayle Tzemach. *Ashley’s War*, n.d.

Ling, L. H. M. “Sex Machine: Global Hypermasculinity and Images of the Asian Woman in Modernity.” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 7, no. 2 (1999): 277–306.

Makoi, Akhtar Mohammad. “‘The Soul of Kabul’: Taliban Paint over Murals with Victory Slogans.” *The Guardian*. Islamabad, September 7, 2021, sec. World news. Accessed November 15, 2021.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/07/the-soul-of-kabul-taliban-paint-over-murals-with-victory-slogans>.

Mashal, Mujib, Najim Rahim, and Fatima Faizi. “A Storied Female Warlord Surrenders, Taliban Say, Exposing Afghan Weakness.” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2020, sec. World. Accessed March 28, 2022.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/18/world/asia/commander-pigeon-afghanistan-woman-commander.html>.

- Mosher, Donald L., and Silvan S. Tomkins. "Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation." *The Journal of Sex Research* 25, no. 1 (1988): 60–84.
- N, P, and R. "Malalai Joya: 'A Woman Among Warlords.'" *NPR*, October 27, 2009, sec. World. Accessed April 24, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=114207995>.
- Noorzai, Roshan. "Former Afghan Female Soldier: 'I Am So Afraid' Under Taliban." *VOA*. Accessed March 20, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/former-afghan-female-soldier-i-am-so-afraid-under-taliban-/6376154.html>.
- Percy, Jennifer. "My Terrifying Night With Afghanistan's Only Female Warlord." *The New Republic*, October 14, 2014. Accessed March 28, 2022. <https://newrepublic.com/article/119772/my-night-afghanistans-only-female-warlord-commander-pigeon>.
- Peter, Tom A. "A Woman's War: The Rise and Fall of Afghanistan's Female Warlord." Accessed March 28, 2022. <http://america.aljazeera.com/features/2014/4/commander-kaftarafemalewarlordinafghanistan.html>.
- Peterson, Robin. "Fighting to Fight: An Analysis of the Women Who Are Changing National Security," 2021.
- Peterson, S.R., M Vetterling-Braggin, and F.A. Elliston. *Coercion and Rape: The State as a Male Protection Racket*. Vol. Feminism and Philosophy. Totowa, NJ, 1977.
- Press, Associated. "'Some Kind of Terrible Dream' for Ukrainian Women Refugees." *VOA*. Accessed March 23, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/some-kind-of-terrible-dream-for-ukrainian-women-refugees/6475086.html>.
- RAWA. "Afghan Women's Fight for Freedom and Democracy Will Never Fail!" *Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)*, October 7, 2021. <http://www.rawa.org/rawa/2021/10/07/afghan-women-s-fight-for-freedom-and-democracy-will-never-fail.html>.
- . "Let Us Struggle Against War and Fundamentalism and for Peace and Democracy!" *Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)*, March 8, 2002. <http://www.rawa.org/mar8-02en.htm>.
- RAWA Afghanistan. *Grit TV: A Voice from RAWA: Zoya on Afghanistan (Part1/2)*, 2009. Accessed April 7, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T56poXXmDoU>.
- Rosenberg, Jennifer S., and Denis Bakomeza. "Let's Talk about Sex Work in Humanitarian Settings: Piloting a Rights-Based Approach to Working with



- Refugee Women Selling Sex in Kampala.” *Reproductive Health Matters* 25, no. 51 (November 30, 2017): 95–102.
- Runyan, Anne Sisson, and V. Spike Peterson. *Global Gender Issues in the New Millennium*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014. Accessed November 1, 2021. <https://web-p-ebshost-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=d2d9a53b-3851-4480-a327-54a0a750c186%40redis&vid=0&format=EK>.
- Salbi, Zainab, Alice Walker, Sylvia Plachy, Susan Meiselas, and Lekha Singh. *The Other Side of War: Women’s Stories of Survival & Hope*. Washington D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006.
- Sara, Sally. “Meet Afghanistan’s First Woman Military Helicopter Pilot.” *ABC News*, February 12, 2013. Accessed October 11, 2021. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/specials/mama-asia/2013-02-12/latifa-nabizada-mama-asia-afghanistan/4489756>.
- Shear, Michael D., and Jim Tankersley. “Biden Defends Afghan Pullout and Declares an End to Nation-Building.” *The New York Times*, September 1, 2021, sec. U.S. Accessed April 24, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/us/politics/biden-defends-afghanistan-withdrawal.html>.
- Sjoberg, Laura. *Gender, War & Conflict*. Polity Press, 2014.
- Sjoberg, Laura, and Caron E. Gentry. *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics*. London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 2007.
- Sjoberg, Laura, and Jessica Peet. “A(Nother) Dark Side of the Protection Racket.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 163–182.
- Sopko, John F. *Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*. Arlington, Virginia: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, February 2021. Accessed March 20, 2022. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-18-LL.pdf>.
- Strochlic, Nina, and Arin Yoon. “A Military Spouse Reflects on Life over Two Decades of War—and What Comes Next.” *History*. Last modified September 10, 2021. Accessed October 23, 2021. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/military-spouse-reflects-on-life-over-two-decades-of-war>.
- Struck, Doug. “Veil Is Lifted in Mazar-e Sharif.” *Washington Post*, November 12, 2001. Accessed April 20, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/11/12/veil-is-lifted-in-mazar-e-sharif/de3a9831-526d-4540-9440-5b525418b967/>.

- Support, Ways to, Wishbook, Careers, Find a USO, Volunteer, Share your USO Story, About Us, et al. "Over 200 Years of Service: The History of Women in the U.S. Military." *United Service Organizations*. Accessed March 24, 2022. <https://www.uso.org/stories/3005-over-200-years-of-service-the-history-of-women-in-the-us-military>.
- . "What Separates the Marines From the Other Branches?" *United Service Organizations*. Accessed November 28, 2021. <https://www.uso.org/stories/2910-what-separates-the-marines-from-the-other-branches>.
- VICE News. *Life in the Taliban's Afghanistan*, 2022. Accessed February 27, 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iIFi\\_Rgm-T8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iIFi_Rgm-T8).
- Yoon, Arin. "To Be At War." *To Be At War / Arin Yoon*. Accessed October 23, 2021. <http://www.tobeatwar.com/about>.
- Zoya, John Follain, and Rita Cristofari. *Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom*. First. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002.
- "97 Percent of Afghans Could Plunge into Poverty by Mid 2022, Says UNDP | United Nations Development Programme." *UNDP*. Accessed April 19, 2022. <https://www.undp.org/press-releases/97-percent-afghans-could-plunge-poverty-mid-2022-says-undp>.
- "100 Best War in Afghanistan Books of All Time." *BookAuthority*. Accessed March 23, 2022. <https://bookauthority.org/books/best-war-in-afghanistan-books>.
- "A Historical Timeline of Afghanistan." *PBS NewsHour*. Last modified May 4, 2011. Accessed April 19, 2022. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/asia-jan-june11-timeline-afghanistan>.
- "'A Poison in the System': The Epidemic of Military Sexual Assault - The New York Times." Accessed October 23, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/magazine/military-sexual-assault.html>.
- "About RAWA..." Accessed November 15, 2021. <http://www.rawa.org/rawa.html>.
- "About Us." *ArtLords*, n.d. Accessed November 15, 2021. <https://www.artlords.co/about-us/>.
- "AFGHAN WOMEN'S MISSION A PROJECT OF SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ENTREPRENEURS." *About Us*. Last modified 2017 2000. <https://www.afghanwomensmission.org/about/>.
- "Afghan Women's Network." Accessed April 18, 2022. <http://www.afghanwomensnetwork.org/>.

- “Afghanistan.” *International Rescue Committee (IRC)*. Accessed April 17, 2022.  
<https://www.rescue.org/country/afghanistan>.
- “Afghanistan: One Military Spouse’s Perspective.” *Jen McDonald*. Accessed October 23, 2021. <https://jen-mcdonald.com/show-notes/afghanistan-one-military-spouses-perspective>.
- “Afghanistan Population 2022 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs).” Accessed April 20, 2022. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/afghanistan-population>.
- “Afghanistan: Surge in Women Jailed for ‘Moral Crimes.’” *Human Rights Watch*, May 21, 2013. Accessed April 6, 2022.  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/21/afghanistan-surge-women-jailed-moral-crimes>.
- Afghanistan’s Female Warlord*, 2015. Accessed March 30, 2022.  
<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghan-female-warlord/27377111.html>.
- “Annex B | Afghanistan Timeline.” *National Defense University Press*. Accessed April 19, 2022. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/915975/annex-b-afghanistan-timeline/>.
- “Bush Burqa.” Accessed April 20, 2022.  
<https://www3.trincoll.edu/csrlp/RINVol5No1/Bush%20burqa.htm>.
- “Coverture: The Word You Probably Don’t Know But Should.” *National Women’s History Museum*. Accessed January 4, 2022.  
<https://www.womenshistory.org/articles/coverture-word-you-probably-dont-know-should>.
- “DCAS Reports - Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Military Deaths.” Accessed October 23, 2021. [https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/report\\_oef\\_deaths.xhtml](https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/report_oef_deaths.xhtml).
- “Deborah Sampson.” *National Women’s History Museum*. Accessed May 12, 2021.  
<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/deborah-sampson>.
- “DMDC Web.” Accessed October 23, 2021. <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>.
- “Equality, Property, and Marriage.” Accessed January 4, 2022.  
<https://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/omalley/120f02/america/marriage/>.
- “Fallen Heroines.” *Sisters Of Service*, n.d. Accessed April 24, 2022.  
<https://sistersofservice.org/fallen-heroines/>.

- “Female Shuras Uncover Hardships Facing Rural Afghan Women.” *U.S. Central Command*. Accessed October 13, 2021. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/884446/female-shuras-uncover-hardships-facing-rural-afghan-women/>.
- “Foreign Military Studies Office Publications - Whither the Taliban?” Accessed April 20, 2022. <https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/990306-taliban.htm>.
- “Gendered Graduation Approach.” Last modified 2021. Accessed April 21, 2022. <https://www.womenforwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/GenderedApproach2021.pdf>.
- “Help Protect the Women and Children in Afghanistan with UNICEF USA.” *KTLA*, September 2, 2021. Accessed December 7, 2021. <https://ktla.com/morning-news/help-protect-the-women-and-children-in-afghanistan-with-unicef-usa/>.
- “Home.” *Sisters Of Service*. Accessed April 17, 2022. <https://sistersofservice.org/>.
- “‘I Am Ready’: Mata Hari Faced a Firing Squad for Spying — and Refused a Blindfold.” *Washington Post*, n.d. Accessed March 9, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/10/15/i-am-ready-mata-hari-faced-a-firing-squad-for-spying-and-refused-a-blindfold/>.
- “It’s Not You, It’s Me: How World War II’s ‘Dear John’ Letters Changed American Society.” *Time*, February 14, 2022. Accessed March 9, 2022. <https://time.com/6137746/dear-john-letters-world-war-ii/>.
- “Iva Toguri d’Aquino and ‘Tokyo Rose.’” Page. *Federal Bureau of Investigation*. Accessed March 9, 2022. <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/iva-toguri-daquino-and-tokyo-rose>.
- “Meet 16 Brave Women Human Rights Defenders from Afghanistan.” *Amnesty International*, November 25, 2019. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/16-days-of-activism-afghanistan-whrds/>.
- “Ministry Confirms 90% of Afghans Live Below Poverty Line.” *TOLONews*. Accessed April 19, 2022. <https://tolonews.com/business/ministry-confirms-90-afghans-live-below-poverty-line>.
- “Motherhood and Apple Pie.” Accessed March 7, 2022. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/motherhood-and-apple-pie>.
- “No Buildings for 7,000 Afghan Schools: Ministry.” *TOLONews*. Accessed April 19, 2022. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-166416>.

- “Our Approach | Women for Women International.” Accessed April 21, 2022. <https://www.womenforwomen.org/our-approach>.
- “President Declares ‘Freedom at War with Fear.’” Accessed April 20, 2022. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.
- “Radio Address by Mrs. Bush.” Accessed April 20, 2022. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html>.
- “Refugee Women and Girls Make the World a Healthier Place.” Accessed November 29, 2021. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/refugee-women-and-girls-make-the-world-a-healthier-place/>.
- “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan.” *The White House*. Last modified April 14, 2021. Accessed April 20, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.
- “Remarks on the Women-in-Service Review.” *U.S. Department of Defense*. Accessed April 19, 2022. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/632495/remarks-on-the-women-in-service-review/>.
- “Rereading Thucydides: Where Are the Women?” *The Strategy Bridge*. Accessed March 2, 2022. <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2019/10/8/rereading-thucydides-where-are-the-women>.
- “Sadaa E Zan (Voices of Women) : Afghan Women’s Mission,” n.d. Accessed April 19, 2022. <https://www.afghanwomensmission.org/2003/11/sadaa-e-zan-voices-of-women/>.
- “Shamsia Hassani - Official Website.” Accessed October 11, 2021. <https://www.shamsiahassani.net/>.
- “Six Months on from Change in Power, IRC Warns Starvation Could Kill More Afghans than Last Twenty Years of War as 97 per Cent of Population Faces Poverty.” *International Rescue Committee (IRC)*. Last modified February 15, 2022. Accessed April 17, 2022. <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/six-months-change-power-irc-warns-starvation-could-kill-more-afghans-last-twenty-years>.
- “Taliban Making ‘Kill List’ Of Afghan Sex Workers On Porn Sites: Report,” n.d. Accessed April 3, 2022. <https://www.shethepeople.tv/news/afghan-sex-workers-taliban-kill-list-porn-sites-prostitutes/>.

- “The Top 10 War Books of All Time.” *Historynet*. Last modified May 24, 2018. Accessed March 2, 2022. <https://www.historynet.com/top-10-war-books-time/>.
- “The Untold Story of the Afghan Women Who Hunted the Taliban.” Accessed April 14, 2022. <https://politico.com/interactives/2022/afghan-women-soldiers-taliban-us-refugees/>.
- “The U.S. Army Cultural Support Team Program: Historical Timeline.” Accessed May 11, 2021. [https://arsof-history.org/articles/v12n2\\_cst\\_timeline\\_page\\_1.html](https://arsof-history.org/articles/v12n2_cst_timeline_page_1.html).
- “The US Military Claims These Men It Killed Were ‘Terrorists’ but We Know They Were Civilian Farmers.” *Amnesty International*. Last modified September 30, 2019. Accessed December 17, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/us-military-shows-appalling-disregard-for-civilians-killed-in-somalia-air-strike/>.
- “UIS Statistics.” Accessed April 20, 2022. <http://data.uis.unesco.org/index.aspx?queryid=121>.
- “Women Warriors: The Ongoing Story of Integrating and Diversifying the American Armed Forces.” *Brookings*, May 7, 2020. Accessed October 23, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/women-warriors-the-ongoing-story-of-integrating-and-diversifying-the-armed-forces/>.
- “Women’s Refugee Commission Stands in Solidarity with Afghan Women Leaders in Wake of Biden Asset Announcement.” *Women’s Refugee Commission*, n.d. Accessed April 19, 2022. <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/press-releases/womens-refugee-commission-stands-in-solidarity-with-afghan-women-leaders-in-wake-of-biden-asset-announcement/>.
- “Women’s Rights in Afghanistan Must Be Steadfastly Respected.” *Human Rights Watch*, March 20, 2014. Accessed April 14, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/20/womens-rights-afghanistan-must-be-steadfastly-respected>.
- “Writer: ‘This Picture Tells a Tragic Story of What Happened to Women After D-Day.’” *Time*. Accessed April 24, 2022. <https://time.com/5303229/women-after-d-day/>.
- “Zoe Bedell.” Accessed October 13, 2021. <https://www.cnas.org/people/zoe-bedell>.