

**At Home or in the Grave
Afghan Women and the Reproduction of
Patriarchy**

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction	1
Absence of the State, Conflict and Identity Formation.....	2
The Reproduction of Patriarchy	7
Cultural Sensitivity, Aid Programs and the Reproduction of Patriarchy	18
Afghan Women’s Resistance to Violence and Patriarchy.....	29
Summary and Reflections.....	37
Bibliography	39

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At Home or in the Grave

Afghan Women and the Reproduction of Patriarchy

Rubina Saigol

Abstract

This paper is based on 50 interviews of Afghan refugee women, collected by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad. The purpose of the in-depth interviews was to explore issues of identity, nationhood, state, belonging, home, family and location in the context of the prolonged Afghan conflict and its impact upon women's lives. Apart from the interviews of refugee women, other materials used include reference papers, newspaper and magazine articles, books on the Afghan war, and the reports and papers of UN and other aid agencies engaged in Afghanistan. The methodology is based on a deconstructive analysis of the narratives of Afghan refugee women, and a critical content analysis of the discourse of aid agencies. The reference material was used to substantiate or support the arguments presented in the paper.

The research study revealed several aspects of the situation of women in Afghanistan and in the refugee camps. Some of the main findings include the following: the prolonged Afghan war which has lasted over 22 years, has led to a situation of statelessness in Afghanistan with the result that there are hardly any modern administrative, justice and penal systems in place. The result of state absence is that women have been rendered more completely at the mercy of local tribal jirgas and shuras, which reflect and promote patriarchal values and norms detrimental to women's rights and well being. The persistent condition of conflict among various factions has led to increased levels of violence against women including rape, murder and mutilation. One effect of the perpetual threat from other factions is that increased controls on women's movement, behaviour and freedom have been placed as a way of 'protecting' them from the 'enemy'. The frustration resulting from injury and maiming, and the perceived threat to women from opposing groups, has led men of the group to commit acts of violence against their own women. Added to the increased pressure to preserve the group's moral purity, are economic burdens upon women who now go out in search of cheaply paid domestic labour in order to survive. The conflict decomposes, and simultaneously recomposes patriarchies.

Well-meaning scholars and aid officials have reinforced conservative and traditional patriarchal values, especially with regard to education, as a way of 'helping' Afghan women by reaching them only via their men. This has led to a further disempowering of women by reinforcing male control over the direction and flow of aid.

However, Afghan women have not passively accepted patriarchal practices and control over their lives. Resistance by women has been evident in cultural as well as political forms, and at the individual as well as collective levels.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the relationship of Afghan, mainly Pashtoon, women with the protracted war in Afghanistan. The paper is divided into four sections, namely 1) Absence of the State, Conflict and

Identity Formation, 2) The Reproduction of Patriarchy, 3) Cultural Sensitivity, Aid Programs and the Reproduction of Patriarchy, and 4) Afghan Women's Resistance to Violence and Patriarchy. Section 1 examines the effects of statelessness upon women in terms of the way in which the absence of a legitimate central authority, including judicial and administrative systems, affects the lives of women and the population in general. This section contextualizes the Afghan war and explores the complex relation between conflict and the formation of identity. Section 2 examines the ways in which the prolonged conflict has intensified patriarchal practices by means of increased restrictions, veiling, domestic violence, rape and murder of women. An attempt has been made to shed some light on the way in which conflicts tend to reinforce and strengthen patriarchies. Section 3 examines the discourse produced by aid agencies and international assistance in the 1980s and 1990s, with a view toward exploring how aid and assistance practices can themselves become the means of disempowering women and reproducing male systems of power. Section 4 is based on the recognition that Afghan women have not remained silent and passive observers of the conflict, but have actively offered resistance in various forms. Some of the forms discussed include cultural forms of resistance as expressed in poetry and song, individual resistance to violence against women, and collective resistance by organizations such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. An attempt is made to demonstrate that Afghan women have been active interlocutors in the ethnic and sectarian struggles, especially by being the most vociferous champions of peace, democracy and justice.

1. Absence of the State, Conflict and Identity Formation

Afghanistan harbours a vast and complex array of ethnic and sectarian groups, each one of which is vying for political supremacy. The Pashtuns are the largest single ethnic group constituting about 40% of the population. They are predominantly Sunni Muslims and live primarily in the centre, southern and eastern parts of the country. Pashtuns also make up the majority of the refugees in Pakistan, as the Pashtun tribal population of Pakistan's Frontier province shares a common language and cultural links with Afghan

Pashtuns. The second largest group in Afghanistan are the Tajiks whose language is Persian and most of them are also Sunni Muslims, however Shi'a Muslim Tajiks are found in the West of the country around the city of Herat. A sub-group of the Tajiks are known as Panjsheris who also practice Sunni Islam and speak a dialect of Dari known as Panjeri. The Hazaras of Eastern Turkic origin are Shi'ite Muslims and speak Farsi. The Uzbeks and Turkomans are also Sunnis but are linguistically and ethnically Turkic. Some of the other Afghan Turkic groups include the Kypchak, Kazadh, Aimaq, Wakhi and Kirghiz. The Nuristanis live in the Hindu Kush mountain range in four valleys each of which has its own dialect – Kati, Waigali, Ashkun and Parsun. The Baluchis and Brahuis also practice Sunni Islam and speak Brahui and Baluchi respectively. Muslims comprise 99% of the total population of Afghanistan, of which about 80% are Sunni Muslims. The Shia minority is concentrated in central and western Afghanistan. The country's Hindu, Jewish and Sikh population, which once numbered about 50,000, has been consistently reduced due to migration and refuge abroad to escape perpetual war.¹

As regards the languages of Afghanistan, Pashtu is spoken by the Pashtuns, and Dari, a dialect of Persian, is spoken by the Tajiks, Farsis, Hazaras and Aimaq. These have been the official languages

1 The information provided here has been derived from the Country Information Unit of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Centre for Documentation and Research.

of Afghanistan which use an augmented Arabic script. However, since 1978, a multitude of languages, used by ethnic minorities such as Uzbeks, Turkomans, Baluchis, Nuristanis, and Pashai have been officially recognized.² With such a complicated ethnic and linguistic diversity, the interpretation of Islam differs vastly from one group to another. Ethnic and tribal codes tend to become intermixed with religious injunctions, thereby often blurring the distinction between religion and what is regarded as 'culture', 'custom' or 'tradition'.

1.1 Failure of State Formation

Over twenty years of continual conflict in Afghanistan has impeded the processes of state formation, along with the attendant institutions such as a rational judicial system, administrative structures, a durable legal framework, as well as various kinds of service delivery mechanisms. The absence of any kind of a legitimate central authority has rendered the civilian population at the mercy of warlords and commanders of various factions locked in a perpetual war of supremacy and control. In recent years, the Taliban, who represented the majority Pashtun ethnic identity, took control of over 90% of Afghanistan's geographical area. Nonetheless, competing groups in the North, such as the Tajiks and Uzbeks, continued to pose a challenge to the Taliban, with the result that peace remained an elusive dream in Afghanistan ever since the Soviet invasion of 1979. The Taliban were recognized as the legitimate central authority in Afghanistan by only three countries namely, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. All three withdrew their recognition in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent removal of the Taliban. The rest of the world never accepted their rule as legitimate.

The failure to devise a system capable of accommodating Afghanistan's diverse population within a plural, democratic, inclusive, responsive and responsible state, has been exacerbated by several years of foreign intervention in the country. The countries mainly responsible for interference in Afghanistan for their own vested interests are the former USSR, US, Pakistan and Iran. The Soviet Union and the United States fought a proxy war in Afghanistan over ideological as well as economic interests. Pakistan, as a frontline state, placed its resources in the service of the United States' goal of containing communism in the region. Pakistan was also seeking a trade route to Central Asia via Afghanistan, while Iran has been involved in helping the Shi'ite population of Hazara against the dominant Sunni Pashtuns. By supporting different factions of the warring groups in Afghanistan, foreign powers have helped sustain the conflict over a long period of time. Prolonged foreign intervention, for competing reasons, has also been instrumental in preventing possible resolution by peaceful means.³

The absence of state structures, which are responsible for ensuring people's rights, has been noted by many observers. For example Pamela Collett, Education Consultant for Save the Children (USA), wrote in 1994 that

2 Country Information Unit of UNHCR's Centre for Documentation and Research.

3 In this context, Ahmed Rashid points out that From Central Asia to Indonesia, outsiders see the new Afghan civil war as a massive training ground for their own beliefs, to be put into practice elsewhere. Clearly, Afghanistan's future survival as a unified state depends as much on the willingness of outside powers to stop fuelling their proteges inside the country, as it does on Afghans themselves ending their ethnic rivalries and reaching a reconciliation. Further elaborating upon the role played by the superpowers, Rashid writes 'of all the countries involved in the Afghan imbroglio in the past, it is ironic that the US and the former Soviet Union have got off extremely lightly by distancing themselves from the present drama in Kabul. They were the real protagonists in the Afghan war, who turned Afghanistan into a battleground for the global Cold War, with both sides determined to fight to the last Afghan. Ahmed Rashid. 'Will the Centre Hold?' The Herald. May 1992. pp. 26-27.

*Afghanistan does not have an effective central government. Administrative units are not the provinces but regions which are either governed by commanders or by councils (shuras). There is no central authority, judiciary, army, police or rule of law.*⁴

Collett refers to the insecurity experienced by women due to statelessness, by arguing that they ‘feel insecure as there are no institutions or legal protection of women’s human rights. There is no security for any Afghans as armed militia are a law unto themselves’.⁵ In the absence of state structures to protect Afghan women from the ravages of war, it was argued that ‘Afghan traditions’ would protect women. However, this expectation proved false as one Afghan woman summed up the situation by saying that

*women have no human rights in Afghanistan; women have no protection, no guarantee of personal safety and security. In the past, many Afghans assumed that women would be protected by the cultural traditions that respected women as wives and mothers. However, with the disintegration of society during the long period of civil war, traditions which had established some respect for women have disappeared. Because no women’s human rights have been institutionalized, that is given a legal basis, women have nothing to fall back on and no protection.*⁶

Similar sentiments were echoed by an Afghan woman, Masooma, during an interview:

Great damages were done in Afghanistan. The systems (of administration) of Civil Services and Defence Forces have eroded.

The protracted conflict thus eroded the basis of a legal, moral or recognized authority to deal with differences, ensure peace and security, and provide basic services to the population – in other words, state absence led to a vacuum, in that there were no institution to perform the basic functions of a modern, democratic state. The fact that the various Afghan militias were, and still are, a law unto themselves, means that there *is* no law, or the law of the jungle prevails.

The result of the absence of accountable and legitimate systems and structures, was widespread anarchy and a total absence of any continuity of values, norms, beliefs, practices and policies. One form that this anarchy took was the massive dislocation of large parts of the population, coupled with displacement (internal and external), abduction and rape of women, violence, economic insecurity, murder, torture, maiming and mutilation of human beings, apart from fear, hopelessness, depression and the absence of a sense of a future for the coming generations. Since about 80% of Afghan refugees are women and children, they have been the worst affected in the endless war. Nearly all the women refugees, interviewed for the SDPI study, reported widespread rape, torture and abduction of women of all sides, by all sides of the conflict.

4 Pamela Collett. Report submitted to Equality Now, for the UN Human Rights Committee, review of Afghanistan. 1994.

5 Pamela Collett. Report submitted to Equality Now for UNHRC.

6 Quoted by Pamela Collett in the Report to Equality Now for UNHRC.

1.2 Conflict as the Re-construction of Identity

An issue that has been raised by many observers, as well as by Afghan women themselves, pertains to the fact that this is a case of Muslim killing Muslim ('brother killing brother' as expressed by many women refugees), and Muslim men raping Muslim women belonging to different ethnic or sectarian groups. This issue raises the complex question of identity in the Afghan conflict. As has been noted by many feminists, conflict is often, if not always, a form of the construction of identity.⁷ Ethnic conflict, in particular, classifies the self and the Other against whom the self is constituted. However, the self constructed as ethnic or national self, is never permanently formed and forever closed. It is perpetually challenged by a host of Others, and in an attempt to re-create and reaffirm itself, it constantly reproduces aspects and elements of what is considered 'Us' (the collective ethnic, sectarian or national self) versus the threatening 'Them'. In this process, characteristics, ideas, aspects, beliefs, practices and elements considered as belonging to the collective Self of the group, tend to be overemphasized, over-asserted and reinforced. Similarly, anything perceived as alien to the Self, and as such destructive to one's being, is either denied or violently suppressed and negated. Violence therefore, whether physical, moral or ideological, tends to be at the heart of identity formation in opposition to inimical and threatening Others. Enemies must be uprooted, destroyed, killed, murdered and even raped in order to destroy the purity of the biological source of the family and, by extension, the nation/ethnic group.⁸ Killing becomes the ultimate form of the classification of the Self and Other, as it is the most violent and final way of separating 'Us' from 'Them'.⁹ The Afghan conflict, in which all sides invoke 'culture' and 'tradition' as a way of sustaining, maintaining and strengthening the particular identity of the group against those who are equally seeking to establish the hegemony of their own group, is a prolonged and painful process of the formation and re-creation of identity – Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek or other.

However, the identity invoked and deployed as a power mechanism, is a highly fractured one. It is a torn, unstable and, at best, a tentative identity as its perpetual re-construction requires the denial and negation of other, equally important and central, parts of the self. The great majority of the people involved in the Afghan conflict are Muslims, but the need to defend, reinforce and re-create tribal and ethnic identities, leads them into killing, wounding, torturing and murdering other Muslim men, and raping, abducting and violating Muslim women. This conflict of multiple and overlapping identities is resolved by interweaving the tribal or ethnic identity with the Islamic one. In the Afghan situation, the religious and ethnic identities are so conflated or interwoven that many Pashtun 'traditions' and/or 'customs' are perceived as being Islamic. The Pashtunwali code, a tribal code of honour, tends to override the considerations of Islam, and many Pashtuns believe that they are more Pashtun than Muslim.¹⁰

7 See for example, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's Borders and Boundaries, 'Abducted Women, the State and Questions of Honour' in Jaywardena, K. and Malathi de Alwis (eds) Embodied Violence, pp. 1-31; Khan, Nighat S., Rubina Saigol and Afiya S. Zia (eds) Locating the Self; Rubina Saigol's 'Militarization, Nation and Gender: Women's Bodies as Arenas of Violent Conflict', in Mian, Z. and Iftikhar Ahmad (eds) Making Enemies, Creating Conflict: Pakistan's Crises of State and Society; pp. 109-128; Saba Gul Khattak's 'Militarization, Masculinity and Identity in Pakistan – Effects on Women' in Khan, Nighat S., and Afiya S. Zia. Unveiling the Issues, pp. 52-64; and Nighat S. Khan's 'Identity, Violence and Women: A Reflection on the Partition of India 1947', in Khan, Nighat S., Rubina Saigol and Afiya S. Zia (eds) Locating the Self, pp. 157-171.

8 See Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's 'They Wanted to Die: Women, Kinsmen and Partition' paper presented at Conference on Violence Against Women, Victims and Ideologies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, March 1996.

9 Michael Herzfeld, in his The Social Production of Indifference, argues that killing is the ultimate form of the production of boundaries between the self and the other, p. 33.

10 See Country Information Unit of the UNHCR. Centre for Documentation and Research.

The conflict thus becomes one of Pashtun domination, rhetorically laced with Islam as an energizing and legitimizing force. The same holds true for the ethnic minorities who are fighting for their tribal supremacy. Muslim identity seems to take second place to tribal norms, practices and beliefs. Nevertheless, frequent references to Islam are made while defending or upholding practices that are a part only of the tribal code, for example, many women are forced to marry the brother of a husband killed in battle. This custom is not enforced by Islam, but Islam is often invoked in its support. Islam and Muslim identity seem to become props for what appears to be the reproduction of tribal patriarchies.

1.3 Absence of the State and Tribalization of Justice Systems

The absence of a plural, secular and democratic state, capable of incorporating the ethnic multiplicity of Afghanistan by resorting to the principles of a universal, inclusive and equal citizenship of all, strengthened tribal forms of justice thus rendering the population at the mercy of tribal norms, values and practices. In the absence of universally recognized principles of justice and human rights, local patriarchies in the form of jirga systems and shuras have gained enhanced control over the population. In the case of the Afghan refugees, this aspect has been pointed out by Nicola Liv Johnston who writes that:

Refugees were reprimanded according to their own traditional laws, the Jirga system. Their customs and traditions are therefore followed, unless the victim, or victim's family, chose to report the crime to the local police station in which case Pakistani law is employed...locals can also choose to allow the case to be solved by a Jirga since many of them share the same Pathan traditions as the majority of Afghans. This flexible system does not, however, include any provision for women, who have no access to Jirga meetings and difficult access to Pakistani security authorities.¹¹

Such tribal institutions tend to invoke 'culture' and 'tradition' in their judgements in order to strengthen the ethnic group's sense of identity. This kind of invocation tends to further strengthen the tribal codes, which are usually highly oppressive and particularly biased against women. The ethnic conflict in Afghanistan thus becomes a process which reproduces tribal patriarchies as women are excluded from Jirga systems. As long as there is state absence, tribal and 'cultural' norms will tend to govern the lives of Afghan people, in particular women. Such norms tend to attain a greater hold on people's lives in the absence of a democratic and representative central authority, which has legitimacy. The stronger such tribal norms become, partly as a result of the conflict and the need to preserve the self, the more likely is it that any future state will tend to capitulate to such norms in its law-making. State law in such cases comes to be based upon tribal and 'cultural' values, rather than diminishing these values in favour of universally recognized principles, norms and practices. As Iram Noor points out

The legal system existing before 1992 has been ignored by the warlords and the judicial structure has been largely dismantled. Those who perpetuate human rights violations and abuses, do so with virtual impunity.

In several provinces warlords have assumed the functions of judges. In some other provinces Islamic clergy or majlis-e-shooras assume judicial functions. In some of these

11 Nicola Liv Johnston. 'Afghan Refugee Women, What Room for Manoeuvre?' A Study of the Interface between Space, Politics and Gender Identity. p. 37.

*provinces, trials which fall far short of internationally accepted standards of justice have reportedly resulted.*¹²

The Afghan conflict strengthened localised patriarchies due to the failure of integration and the processes of state formation. Women have been the most directly affected by the reinforcement of patriarchies that accompanies the reconstruction of ethnic identity in conflict. The reason for this is that women come to represent and symbolise the honour of the ethnic group more urgently in times of conflict than during times of relative peace. Even in so-called ‘normal’ times, women are burdened with representing the nation or ethnic group whose sense of honour lies in the bodies of women. They are the symbolic borderguards of the nation, ethnic collective or tribal identity.¹³ In times of conflict, when the group is threatened, and the situation is more fluid than normal, the need to protect and defend the moral frontiers of the besieged group, becomes intensified. As a result, patriarchal controls on women intensify as the group attempts to mark its identity on the bodies of its womenfolk. It thereby tries to defend what is perceived as the biological source of its purity and continuity, that is, its women. Patriarchy then comes to be reconstituted and entrenched in a number of ways. The weapons most commonly, and predictably, deployed in this re-enactment of patriarchies, are ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’.

2. The Reproduction of Patriarchy

A woman is best at home or in the grave.
Afghan proverb

While the most commonly understood meaning of ‘patriarchy’ is male domination, feminists have defined the term more broadly to include all ideas, practices, values, beliefs, norms, institutions, behaviour and attitudes which privilege men over women, as well as all that is considered masculine over all activities and attitudes considered feminine. In this sense of the term, patriarchy underscores virtually all aspects of social organization from the family, tribe and community all the way to the state and the global systems. It underpins capitalism, socialism, colonialism, imperialism, religious ideology and organizations, education, legal systems, interpersonal relationships, technology and the military. In short, patriarchal practices and values are universal and tend to inform virtually every aspect of life.

Patriarchy has historically underpinned all forms of state and society and tends to be manifested in myriad forms. It is not a monolithic phenomenon but refers to the various sites of the application of power, and has multiple forms of occurrence. The most consistently observable effects of patriarchy across time periods and cultures have been the denigration of women, reduction of women to lesser status as citizens, subordination of women to male authority in both the public and private spheres, and the devaluation of all that is considered feminine. Another universal effect of patriarchal practices and norms has been unbridled violence against women at home and in the outside world, accompanied by greater controls over women’s activities, movements, expression and freedom. Most patriarchal thought and practice regards women’s role as limited to that of biological reproduction and service to household members within the confines of the home. Thus while patriarchies may differ in the ways and forms in which

12 Iram Noor. ‘Abuse of women in Afghanistan persists’ in *The News*. June 27, 1995.

13 For an understanding of how women are perceived as the ‘symbolic borderguards’ of the culture, see Pnina Werbner and Nira Yuval-Davis (eds), *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, p. 13 & p. 6. Also see ‘Introduction’ of Norma Alarcon, Caren Kaplan and Minoo Moallem (eds) *Between Woman and Nation*.

women are subordinated, controlled or treated, the aims and effects of patriarchal practice tend to be fairly consistent across time and space.¹⁴

In spite of the resilience and universality of patriarchy, it is never already-constructed and pre-existing. Like other products of social and collective imagination, patriarchy too has to be continually reinforced, re-constructed and re-established. In this process, it may change forms and develop new means and ways, but its main aspects remain constant. Conflict creates the context within which patriarchal renewal becomes imperative for the ethnic or social group. As the ethnic group is pitted against Others, the need to re-define boundaries, especially for women, becomes urgent. Religion, culture and tradition often come to be deployed as strategic weapons in the re-organization and re-constitution of patriarchies. Each side of the conflict interprets religion in ways that best suit its specific interests and, in most cases, the interpretation is designed to curtail women's freedom and rights. 'Traditions' are either suddenly invented, or conjured up from the 'distant past' to shore up one's arguments for the increased confinement and disempowerment of women. Culture is re-defined, re-focused and re-interpreted leading to the stronger division of the public and private, with the emphasis being on 'protecting' the women by 'keeping them away from the gaze of the stranger/outsider/enemy', in this case the men of the opponent group.

2.1 Culture and Tradition as Constitutive Elements of Patriarchy

The arguments derived from 'culture' and 'tradition' often assume that these two are already-constructed, pre-given, 'established' structures. Both culture and tradition are believed to have 'always' existed from primordial times, and are claimed to have ancient origin. This kind of 'time of timelessness', expressed in terms of 'always', 'ancient' and 'forever' has been described by Benedict Anderson to be one of the defining features of nationalisms because of their reliance on the negation of history.¹⁵ Historical time is denied in favour of the empty time of nationalism, which is then filled up with myths, fictions and stories of great origins and events. A number of 'traditions' and a large part of 'culture' are thus constructions that in fact exist in historical time, but strategically operate as though outside of it. Hence, they are invoked as sacred and inviolable, transcendent and unassailable. The fact that most 'traditions' and 'culture' tend to be the containment, control and channeling of female sexuality, suits the project of patriarchy well.¹⁶ The sacred inviolability of female sexuality, reserved for her legally married partner, ensures the continuation and perpetuation of patriarchy. As Inger Boesen points out, while veiling is a 'device for sheltering the vulnerable women from male aggression, it may just as well be interpreted as "sheltering" her husband's vested sexual interests in her from being jeopardized through the woman's own sexual aggressiveness or initiative towards other men.'¹⁷

It would not be wrong to argue that in fact culture *is* patriarchy, tradition *is* patriarchy. These two, tradition and culture, are not mere props to patriarchy, but form the fundamental building blocks on which rests the massive edifice of patriarchal structures. This is not to argue that certain traditions and cultures are not liberating, or that they have not challenged patriarchal norms. Rather, what is argued is that most forms of dominant religion, traditions and cultural practices, most often invoked as the continuation of

14 For a comprehensive definition and understanding of patriarchy see Sunila Abeysekera's article in Simorgh's *In the Court of Women*, pp. 13-16; and Farida Shaheed's 'The Cultural Articulation of Patriarchy' in Fareeha Zafar (ed) *Finding Our Way*, pp. 135-158.

15 Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

16 See Ketu Katak's 'Indian Nationalism, Gandhian "Satyagraha" and Representations of Female Sexuality' in Parker, A., Russo, M.; Sommer, D. & Yaeger, P. (eds) *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, pp. 396-398.

17 Inger W. Boesen. 'Women, Honour and Love: Some Aspects of Pashtun Women's Lives in Eastern Afghanistan', p. 232.

past glory, tend to be manifestations of a latent or visible patriarchal urge. Traditions or parts of culture that reflect or produce resistance to dominant forms, are not only fewer but tend frequently to be suppressed and made invisible in history. This is analogous to the way in which those aspects of religion which give women rights, such as inheritance in Islam, are often overlooked while over-emphasizing the parts that enable the control of women. In this context, Inger Boesen explains succinctly how the Pashtun cultural norms regard women as half human beings, minors and dependants liable to social control and, in the case of conflict between Islam and Pashtun norms, the latter prevail.¹⁸ Islam gives way particularly in the areas of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and participation in public religious life.¹⁹

Just as culture and tradition do not exist *a priori* but are perpetually re-enacted and re-created, ethnic group identity is not a given. Pashtun identity, for example, cannot be assumed to exist *a priori*. It has to be perpetually re-created by adding new elements, dropping older ones, and re-defining in the light of change in objective conditions. The Afghan conflict has been one of the ways in which Pashtun identity (as well as other Afghan identities) were re-formed and re-formulated. The selective use and neglect of specific traditions, is an example of how the conflict imposed the necessity to re-form Pashtun identity. For example, many of the Pashtun women interviewed actively resisted the idea of marrying the dead husband's brother despite constant pressure to do so. Many of them argued that this is not a Pashtun tradition, however many Pashtun men tried to force women to re-marry within the family and claimed that it was their tradition. The important aspect to consider is not whether it is or is not a tradition. What is significant is that the women contested what the men presented as a dominant tradition. Women's resistance to the custom reveals the extent to which any tradition may be arbitrary, imagined, invented and contested. The women in this case seemed to have wrenched the power of making meaning from the Pashtun men and re-defined what is meant by 'Pashtun culture'. The following is a typical example of what many women who were interviewed said:

He used to beat children. (brother in law). ...He asked me to marry him but I told him that I have five children and that I don't want to ruin my life. He used to say either marry me or I will be cruel to you. I didn't want another husband to own me. ...He used to beat my children and me. He used to beat them in front of me and when they used to hide behind me I didn't have the courage to stop him from hitting them.

Another interviewee, Rahima, reiterates the same thing:

...Pushtuns have no tradition that she leaves the children and goes to marry another one. It is not our custom.

A widowed refugee woman, Noor Jamala, when asked about a second marriage, replied:

Why should I marry in this state? To whom I leave my children! I told you earlier, my father-in-law had come after me! He turned hostile to me. He became my enemy on the question of my marriage. He proposed that I should marry his second son... bring your children also. I ran away from that place. I abandoned them. I said I don't do it. Neither I marry your son, nor I would let my sons to your slap! Should I leave my children on your mercy... that you beat them! I said their father died. I would immolate my own self in the life. I support my children. I cursed him to be subjected to the wrath of God.

18 Inger W. Boesen. 'Women, Honour and Love: Some Aspects of Pashtun Women's Life in Eastern Afghanistan'. pp. 230-231.

19 Inger Boesen. p, 231.

Many women were beaten or tortured by their in-laws for not submitting to their demand to re-marry. The women's resistance demonstrates the resilience of Pashtun women who, in highly adverse circumstances, have stood up to interpretations of culture designed to control them. This tradition was being constantly re-constructed by men as a Pashtun tradition in the process of identity formation of the ethnic group. However, underlying this tradition, as in the case of many others, are material and pecuniary motives. There is a fear that any property that a woman may own might fall in the hands of an outsider, especially one with whom the group is at war. The material basis of patriarchal traditions often gets overlooked in arguments that refer to age-old inviolable traditions as the basis of Afghan, Pashtun or any culture.

What is also evident from an examination of a number of 'traditions' is that they exist within a matrix of power and inequality. For example, the 'tradition' of killing a woman who has allegedly violated the sexual code of conduct, is used against women, especially to dispense with 'unwanted' women who might be burdens upon the family. Most accusations are unfounded but a large number of women have been murdered in the name of honour. Nicola Johnston refers to an incident in Kacha Gari refugee camp where a husband had shot his new bride because she had not bled on their wedding night. As she writes

This again is accepted according to Pathan law, because it is the only way a man can uphold his 'honour'. Such honour killings are a frequent occurrence. In this way, behaviour is a life or death issue for women. They have very few rights to fall back on once they cross over the accepted boundaries of behaviour.²⁰

This is another way in which statelessness has led to tribal justice systems taking over. In the absence of the state, it is women much more than men, who are punished, mutilated, raped, killed and beaten in the name of Afghan or Pashtun honour. Hence traditions are almost invariably used against women who are the relatively powerless section of Afghan society. It is always important to determine who makes or invokes a tradition, who uses it, against whom, why and how. Without asking such questions, it is easy for an outside observer to take the 'tradition' as neutral, and as an integral part of a culture or society. It is precisely by de-historicizing the concepts of 'tradition' and 'culture' that they have been reified and rendered inaccessible to criticism and change.

2.2 Conflict and the Intensification of Patriarchy

In the refugee situation and in exile, the group's need for the 'preservation of culture' seems to become intensified. Employing the framework developed by Elson and Pearson, Johnston analyses Afghan women's adaptation to refugee conditions and their space for manoeuvre. She utilizes the concepts of 'decomposition' and 'recomposition' to refer respectively to mechanisms of disintegration/decomposition as a result of displacement and dislocation, and the resulting intensified re-enacting/recomposition of threatened cultural stances.²¹ Within the context of the argument presented in this paper, it seems that after a period of disintegration due to displacement, it is patriarchy that is recomposed in intensified forms. The more threatened the accepted identity and norms as a result of dislocation, the more intensified are the processes of the recomposition of patriarchies. The unfamiliar surroundings, along with the presence of strangers/outside, make it more urgent to impose enhanced restrictions on the women. As Johnston explains it

20 Nicola Liv Johnston, 'Afghan Refugee Women: What Room for Manoeuvre?' p. 33.

21 Nicola Johnston, p. 1.

The male family members represent only one set of players in the hierarchy of power. For example, Nadia...could not go to the bazaar on the camp because her husband would be reprimanded by the Mullah...when he went to pray at the mosque. The Mullah would tell him that his wife had been seen too often at the bazaar and that this was dishonourable for his family and he should keep her more under control.

With the declaration of Jihad greater power was afforded to the Mullahs, who instilled much more conservative interpretations of the Koran, which focused specifically on the behaviour of women. Party schools insisted that women were fully veiled, which had never been the case in Afghanistan. This 'Jihad-mentality', where young boys in particular were taught by the Mullahs that it was not 'proper' for women to be seen on the streets, led to women being attacked in 'public' places, particularly during the more radical years of the 80s. In this way, the control of women represented a symbol for the preservation of community honour...During this period of radical Islamic expression, refugee women who had never used a veil before in Kabul, would not go out onto the streets without wearing a burqa.²²

Afghan refugee women reported that in those days if they risked going out without a veil they would be threatened and even hit by Afghan men, something which would never have happened in Afghanistan before this period. The Jihad thus came to be centered on women's bodies by making them invisible, reconstituting the private sphere with a vengeance, and imposing purdah and mobility restrictions more intensely. A patriarchy threatened by inimical outsiders, tends to respond by turning inwards and re-constructing the boundaries of licit and illicit, moral and immoral, permissible and forbidden in its own backyard. Women become the objects of a Jihad in which they gain nothing and have no stake. As the Afghan Women's Network wrote in a letter to Ambassador Mestiri

Women are not profiting from the war, that is, they are not getting power, money or positions as a result of the war. They are only experiencing the suffering and deprivation of war. Women are not corrupted by war in the same way as men. They are more in touch with the suffering of war. They are more involved with the struggle for daily survival. Most women are NOT involved with factions and political parties. Women can see another way to live without fighting and can encourage family members and colleagues to work for peace.²³

Many of the women interviewed for the SDPI study, asked why is Muslim killing Muslim, brother killing brother since women do not seem to relate to any faction or side, as they gain nothing from the war. Several of the refugees asked for unity and wanted the war to end. Nearly all of them blamed each side, every leader or commander for the atrocities committed upon the Afghan people. The following comments by Somia and Fahima respectively, are typical examples:

None of the leaders have worked for their people but for their own interests and hunger for power.

Due to the selfish desire of a few, the whole country has always been engaged in war. To gain power, the life of the whole nation has been sacrificed by these self-centered, egoistic leaders...Majority of Afghans don't want to be involved in this war. People

22 Nicola Johnston, p. 16.

23 Letter by the Afghan Women's Network to Ambassador Mestiri. Dated April 7, 1996.

have hatred towards those who fight. The common man is fed up with this meaningless war which has no end in sight. Just to gain power they are everyday destroying the Afghan nation making Afghanistan gradually weaker. I believe that I am right that those who are fighting are not humans but barbarians, who don't know the meaning of life, the joy of life and they are taking the right of others to live...in Afghanistan there is no life but a gradual death.

A number of other women echoed similar sentiments and mentioned the selfishness of the leaders who, in their opinion, are not fighting for peace or development of Afghanistan but for personal glory and vested interests. Women appear to have had little or no emotional investment in the war. It appears to have been a singularly patriarchal enterprise that promised to deliver glory and eternal life to the males of the ethnic groups. To the women, it delivered misery, loss of relatives, increased economic burdens and endless violence. It was a war clearly divided by gender, as there was hardly one woman who spoke in favour of it or who wanted it to continue. Virtually each one of them wanted peace and believed that external interference in Afghanistan was preventing the return of peace. The following comment by Wajia is a typical example of the many women who believed the war to have been externally sustained and motivated:

The country is in the grip of ethnic clashes because of foreign intervention. It is a conspiracy to divide our people. But our people have unfortunately become puppets in the hands of others.

Another interviewee, Masooma, also holds foreign intervention responsible for the war in Afghanistan and resultant destruction. She says:

If there is no foreign interference in our country, and Afghans gather, with the spirit of Afghanityat, to consider their problems without any foreign intervention, not by dint of force but by virtue of negotiations, they consider their problems, if God wills, the crisis of Afghanistan would be solved very soon. But, unfortunately, foreign hands work among Afghans. Every country seeks its interest in destruction of our country. For example, every country wants to establish a friendly government in the neighbour. For example, Iran also thinks of formation of a government of their choice in Afghanistan. Pakistan also wants a friendly government. Every one thinks of a friendly government...Afghans themselves should establish such a government with consensus.

While women have nothing to gain from the war which seems to reinforce patriarchies, increased restrictions on women and the narrowing of their personal and political space, are consequences of the war which have been observed by other writers as well. For example, Saba Gul Khattak reproduces the *Fatwa* (religious edict) delivered by the United Ulema of Afghanistan, in her analysis of the effects of militarization, intensified masculinity/patriarchy and the effects on women.²⁴ The entire edict derives legitimacy from the Qura'an and Hadith while reinforcing and strengthening patriarchal norms and values. It revolves around a series of restrictions on women's mobility, dress, behaviour and public exposure. The *fatwa* declares that *purdah* and decency are a must for a woman and that she should learn only from people who are not strangers to her. It admonishes women to confine themselves to the private sphere by saying that 'a woman must stay in her home and/or tent and preserve her inner/outer

24 See Saba Gul Khattak's paper 'Militarization, Masculinity and Identity in Pakistan – Effects on Women: War in the Neighbourhood and Militarization at Home', in *Unveiling the Issues*. pp. 52-64.

appearance.²⁵ The level of preoccupation with women's bodies is evident from the directions given in case women have to leave home for necessities. For example, the *fatwa* says, 'No Perfume; no beautiful, eye-catching attire; no soft/clinging clothes; no tight clothes; the entire body should be covered; no men-like attire, no infidel style clothing; no anklets should jingle; no provocative walking; no walking in the middle of the street; no going out without permission from her man; no talking with strange men...no laughing; no looking at strangers with passion; and no association with men'.²⁶ This passage is riddled with patriarchal anxiety and fear of any possible contact with the stranger/outsider/enemy and the potential pollution that such contact might cause.

Women were forbidden from going to mosques, schools and the market – all places considered the male public sphere, pregnant with dangers of mixture with unfamiliar men and the possibility of contact with men belonging to the enemy ethnic group. Women were further ordered to give all outside work to men, refrain from learning History, Geography and English, avoid being social and to stay away from learning to read and write. Going to schools was particularly forbidden as sinful and the Ulema warned that 'If this action is not taken, the success of Jihad will turn to failure and we will face harsh problems'. This admonition is followed by the threat that 'If corrective action is not taken and women still go out and show themselves, we will be forced to take action ourselves'.²⁷ The above *fatwa* not only reflects patriarchal anxiety regarding the loss of control over women as a result of displacement and dislocation, it demarcates the inviolable boundaries between the masculine/public and feminine/private spheres with a sense of endangered urgency. Patriarchy, couched in a religious idiom, threatens to take direct action if the detailed instructions are not followed precisely. The success of Jihad, so goes the argument, depends upon the confinement and invisibility of women. This notion can be related to the argument presented above that Jihad is a form of identity-construction against an Other, who can potentially defile the women of one's group, that is, the biological source of the continuity of the ethnic group. Therefore, 'protecting' women from the evils lurking in the outside world, is a matter of life and death for ethnic patriarchies.

With the rise of the Taliban to power, religious edicts regarding the control over women also became intensified. According to Ahmed Rashid, the Taliban's religious police 'forced Afghan women to disappear entirely from public view'.²⁸ In the summer of 1997, regulations were issued 'which banned women from wearing high heels, making a noise with their shoes while they walked, or wearing make-up'.²⁹ The public sphere was thus aggressively reconstituted as male, while invisibility and silence were imposed upon women. According to a decree announced by the Religious Police in November 1996,³⁰ women were forbidden from stepping outside the house, while Islam was defined as a rescuing religion, which has valuable instructions for women. Women were ordered not to attract the attention of useless people, and if they needed to go outside the house, they were required to cover themselves in accordance with Islamic Sharia regulation. Women were admonished that if they ventured outside in fashionable, ornamental, tight and charming clothes, they would be cursed by Islamic Sharia and denied access to heaven.

In the rules for State Hospitals in Kabul, issued in November 1996, female patients and doctors were advised to wear full Islamic dress during a physical examination.³¹ A strict segregation between male and female doctors was required making even professional contact difficult. In December 1996, drivers were

25 Saba Gul Khattak. p. 59.

26 Saba Gul Khattak. p. 60.

27 Saba Gul Khattak, p. 61.

28 Ahmed Rashid. Taliban. p. 105.

29 Ahmed Rashid. Taliban. p. 105.

30 See Ahmed Rashid's Taliban. Appendix 1 for details of the religious edicts. Pp. 217-219.

31 Ahmed Rashid, Taliban. p. 218.

prohibited from giving a ride to women who wore the Iranian *burqa* (covering).³² There seems to have been a simultaneous construction of the public and private, masculine and feminine spheres with a vengeance, and the Iranian Muslim as the Other. Threatened patriarchies seem to defend themselves by resorting to minute regulations focused on the female body – the ultimate space of threat for a newly-emergent order that finds itself in the midst of opposition. The detailed regulation of the female body as the arena of contest with the Other, and the unbridgeable division of the public and private, appear to have been the instruments employed by the Taliban to shore up their own particular brand of patriarchal distinction. The instrumental use of Islam seems to have provided the ideological cover needed for practices of control, regulation, surveillance and domination.

In conditions of exile, the male response for the recomposition of patriarchy has meant greater veiling and mobility restrictions for refugee women. Christensen attributes the increased emphasis upon *purdah* in refugee communities to the insecurity of exile, and living in a strange land, while being confronted ceaselessly by the presence of the Other.³³ This observation belies an argument occasionally made among feminist circles that the breakdown of dominant norms and structures in periods of crisis and dislocation, tends to loosen the reins of patriarchal control allowing women greater agency and mobility.³⁴ It seems rather that the opposite is happening and recomposition of accepted norms is done in intensified forms. Johnston states that ‘since the land and home are so much a part of marking their identity, the observation of *purdah* becomes a replacement for the loss of land, with its symbolic establishment of family ‘honour’ and identity. The strict seclusion of women offers the possibility for maintaining one’s own ‘norms’ and upholding one’s own identity against outside pressures. In this way, women become a symbol of continuity from the old environment to the new.’³⁵ Women are thus the objects of a patriarchal discourse in which their own subjectivity is denied. Their seclusion in the home and behind the veil announces the triumph of patriarchy to the outside world. The ethnic patriarchy can thus imagine its continuity despite disruption.

Another form in which the conflict strengthens the various ‘Afghan patriarchies’ is the increased demand placed upon female fertility. A ‘woman’s prestige in the family is nourished by her fertility and, especially, the number of sons she produces’.³⁶ Female fertility is placed in the service of producing soldiers/mujahids for war in most societies where motherhood functions as a prop to the masculine state. The Jihad has heightened this function of motherhood because of the loss of men in war and the need to produce more sons for Jihad. Marriage, as the only legitimate way to reproduce the ethnic group, and the birth of sons as sources of group continuity, are two events greeted with gunfire and celebration.³⁷

32 Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 218.

33 See reference to Hanne Christensen on p. 5 of Nicola Liv Johnston.

34 For example Darini Rajasingham-Senanyake, a Sri Lankan Feminist, argues that ‘...in Sri Lanka the evidence suggests that despite many women’s experience of traumatic violence and displacement, some changes to the gender status quo wrought by armed conflict might have empowered women whose freedom and mobility were restricted by patriarchal mores, morality and convention in peace time’. ‘Ambivalent Empowerment: The Tragedy of Tamil Women in Conflict’, in Rita Manchanda’s *Women, War and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*. p. 127. However, Rajasingham Senanayake is sensitive to the fact that this argument has limits and that the specificity of each case is important. She argues that ‘... in some conflict situations like Afghanistan ...the situation of women has unambiguously deteriorated due to the war and takeover by the Taliban.’ p. 127. Whether or not women will be empowered or disempowered by conflict seems to depend on the nature of the society prior to the conflict, the nature of the conflict itself and the structure of the society after the end of violent conflict.

35 Nicola Liv Johnston. p, 5.

36 Hanne Christensen. *The Reconstruction of Afghanistan: A Chance for Rural Afghan Women*.

37 For this also see Inger W. Boesen. ‘Women, Honour and Love’, p, 234.

Women's reproductive power is harnessed to ethno-chauvinist pursuits, while the women themselves remain disempowered, secluded and unequal members of the society they reproduce.

2.3 Violence as the Enabling Condition of Patriarchy

The large number of incidents of violence committed by the Pashtun form of patriarchy in its attempts to entrench itself by means of raw power, indicate that the religious decrees of the Mullahs on seclusion, veiling and mobility were not mere threats. For example, the Taliban (who were primarily Pashtun) engaged in public beatings and torture of women who, in their view, transgressed the limits set by the ruling militia. The Afghan Women's Network reports that 'one woman was beaten because she was not wearing socks. Another woman who lifted her clothing to jump over a stream was beaten with a heavy rod by the Taliban... Women have no weapons. They are being attacked and beaten by Taliban for no reason except that they are women. This is not peace. This is war against women and girls.'³⁸ In a statement against the Taliban, issued by the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), they argue that 'The "order" they have imposed is based on violence and the fact that they have all the weapons. They rule by direct force and threat of force. The people of Afghanistan have no say about who is ruling them. This is not "peace" or "security".³⁹ The excessive violence by the Taliban has been acknowledged by the Refugee Women in Development, in an urgent appeal on behalf of Afghan women. They observed that the slightest diversion from the strict dress code imposed by the Taliban was punished by public beatings of women in the presence of their children. According to Maliha Danish, 'Taliban officials ban even women's traditionally allowed activities like attending clinics, visiting relatives, shopping, going to shrines and other activities. Through radio and public meetings in Qandahar Taliban force women to stay home and strictly observe purdah, not to wear luxurious, glittery clothes, not to come out to the bazaar'.⁴⁰ The Refugee Women in Development, states that the Taliban leaders who met with the UN envoy said that while they were ready to work for peace, they were unwilling to bend on the issues of human rights for women.⁴¹ Marjorie Lightman of the International League for Human Rights argued that 'the Taliban justified their oppression by falsely asserting that the Islamic religion defines women as inferior humans not entitled to fundamental human rights'.⁴² It is on the control of female sexuality and women's bodies, that patriarchy seems to be inflexible, even though it may capitulate on issues that do not compromise patriarchal control over women's lives.

The fact that the reproduction of ethnic patriarchies, epitomized by the Taliban, had little, if anything, to do with religion, is borne out by an incident related by Gulalai Habib. According to Habib, 'in Charasayab of Logar... the people observed a forced marriage of a group leader of Taliban with a young man! The Mullah who strongly objected and called it anti-Islamic action was killed and the other Mullah had to end the ceremony!'⁴³ Patriarchal control is not merely over women but also extends to young men who may be forced into marriages like this against their will. Taliban youngsters were involved in visiting prostitutes on a more or less regular basis.⁴⁴ Thus, the claim that they were ruling for reasons of moral purity, is belied by the actions of the Taliban.

38 Afghan Women's Network. 'Kabul, the largest prison for women in the world'.

39 Statement by the Afghan Women's Network. October 13, 1996.

40 Maliha Danish, 'Some Information on Women's Human Rights in Afghanistan'. NCA/NRC, Peshawar

41 Refugee Women in Development, Inc. 'Urgent Appeal on Behalf of Afghan Women'. October 10, 1996.

42 Marjorie Lightman. 'Deteriorated Status of Afghan Women'. October 2, 1996.

43 Gulalai Habib. 'A tiny part of the History of Afghan Muslim Women. 1992-1996. (Since the Power of the so-called Mujahideen)'

44 For evidence of the involvement of the Taliban with prostitution, see M. Ilyas Khan's article 'Beyond Good and Evil' in *The Herald*. August 1999. While the Taliban officials denied this by saying that communists and lechers have infiltrated their ranks to defame them, there is little evidence of the moral purity of the Taliban, the one claim on which their case for wanting to control Afghanistan rests.

Afghan women are repeatedly subjected to forced marriage which is a euphemism for rape. Gulalai Habib, while discussing Kabul during Rabbani and Masood's governments, reports that it is not only the Taliban who were involved in barbaric activities, but other groups as well. As Habib says, 'since 1992, no lady felt safe and secure. Families kept their daughters inside or sent them away to rather safe places. Rape, torture and killing, cutting parts of their body (eyes, legs, breasts, etc.) forced marriages of women from opposing groups is the common practice'.⁴⁵ Cutting off women's body parts, especially sexual organs, is reminiscent of the partition of India and seems to be the ultimate defeat one can inflict on the enemy, as it announces that the very organs designed to perpetuate the opposing ethnic group have been mutilated. As in the partition of India, so well documented by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin,⁴⁶ women committed suicide to save themselves from abduction, forced marriage and rape by opposing groups of men.⁴⁷

The women have often appealed to the idea of being fellow-Muslims to save themselves from torture and rape, but ethnic identity formation by means of unbridled violence, has little to do with religion, which becomes a legitimizing cover. Several women refugees interviewed for the current study, referred to the fact that all sides are Muslim, and cannot understand why they are bent upon killing each other. As one woman refugee, Gul Shirin, put it

The Taliban have imposed the war. People said that the Taliban would come with peace. Everything will be cheap. We were all optimistic. It went from bad to worse. A tumult was raised. Homes were captured. People lost hands, feet, husbands, homes, and children. All Muslims, all over, experienced such a plight. Flog this and flog that, kill the men, arrest old men and abduct women...young women are brought to Jalabad, to pul-e-Charkhi. All are dumped in a vehicle. They cry and make noise, they kidnap me, they kidnap me! The poor ones, all of them are in prison at Jalabad. Their husbands remained there and women were brought to Kabul in a vehicle. By God, a woman was there who carried a child wrapped in a blanket. He fell from the blanket and she didn't know it.

A significant number of the women interviewed by SDPI field researchers, mentioned how dislocation and displacement had forced them to leave their homes in search of work to sustain families after the death or maiming of the male family member. This may seem like liberation and increased mobility, that is, decomposition. However, upon closer examination, it is clear that women's economic contribution and family sustenance, after the breadwinner's incapacitation, has not meant emancipation, rather patriarchy found another means by which to maintain its tenuous hold in a situation that threatened to dissolve it. Since it is a part of the imagined Pashtun identity that the man is the breadwinner and women should not work for money⁴⁸, the frustration that resulted from having to live off a woman's earning and to be unable to support the family economically, has been vented on women in the form of increased domestic violence. The image of the ideal male among Afghan refugees was found to be centered around

45 Gulalai Habib.

46 See Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's , Borders and Boundaries and their paper 'Three Perspectives on the Recovery Operation in Post-partition India', pp. 1-31in Embodied Violence.

47 Gulalai Habib.

48 See Nicola Liv Johnston for the construction of the idea of the 'honourable' Afghan male. This idea includes that a man should be able to work and support children and the family and there is social condemnation of men who 'eat the earnings of women'. There is immense pressure on Afghan males to earn and support the family. Also see Nancy Hatch Dupree who writes that 'gainful employment of women was considered to reflect shamefully on male ego-images as sole supporters of their families'. 'The Role of Afghan Women After Repatriation', September 1988, p. 13.

aggression.⁴⁹ This aspect of ‘Afghan identity’ ‘acts as another device for keeping women in seclusion at home and economically dependent on men’.⁵⁰ Male control over economic resources is an important aspect of the capacity to retain women’s veiling as it helps enforce the dependence of, and control over, women.⁵¹ According to Inger Boesen, the ability to maintain women in purdah, and not depend upon their income, is a symbol of social prestige for Afghan males of powerful classes. Purdah, therefore, has class implications for Afghan forms of patriarchy.⁵²

In the refugee situation, a large number of young males have been killed, injured or are still fighting the war in Afghanistan. The pressure to earn an income on those who remain has increased, and several families living together has made it impossible to survive on the man’s wages alone. As a result, a large number of women have been forced into low-income daily wage labour. This has brought down wages overall in the area and has enhanced conflict with local wage earners. A number of Afghan refugee women reported greater violence by maimed or otherwise incapacitated husbands who have found it hard to come to terms with women’s economic and public activity, and their own inability to provide for the family or participate in Jihad. A few examples of violence in the camps are given below. This is what Farida, wife of a former army officer in Afghanistan, says about her husband

Now he is mentally not stable. Sometimes he is OK, but there would be a sudden change in his mood and he would say something is moving in my head. Then he would hit anything that came his way whether it was me or the children, even the hens are not safe. Then later when I ask him why did you do so, he would say I don’t know...He didn’t have such problems in Afghanistan, in fact he was very good with me. He had married me, because he had seen me on the street. I wasn’t like this, I had a good figure and fair skin. Let me show you a picture of mine. If you compare both parts of my life, even you would feel like crying...He beats me. He will hit me with anything which will come in to his hand....It doesn’t matter what I tell him. If he sees that we have run out of flour or the poor conditions in which we are living, he just loses his temper. Then he goes out of the house for 8 or 9 days. When he is normal than he is respectful to everyone. I am very much afraid of him, but back then he was a not like this...Yesterday when I was beaten by my husband, I said to my self it was better that I had died in those rocket attacks than living like this.

Another Afghan refugee, Nasima, who was forced to marry her brother-in-law after her husband was killed, describes her second husband, who is lame, thus:

Sometimes he makes a lot of noise and sometimes he quarrels, because he is disabled. He has no nerves. He is irritated by arguments. Then I keep quiet. If I don’t keep silence, then my hand is fractured...my foot is fractured. He always keeps a stick in his hand.

Ironically, while Nasima describes her husband’s violence and the imposition of silence upon her, she also refers to marriage as protection. This is what she says in a later part of the interview:

I was married...for the sake of protection. Yes, to have a protector. To live in the shadow (under protection) is better than to be exposed to the open, to the sun (risks).

49 Hanne Christensen. The Reconstruction of Afghanistan p. 4.

50 Nicola Johnston, p, 18.

51 Nicola Johnston, p, 18.

52 Inger W. Boesen. ‘Women, Honour and Love’, p, 233.

When a woman becomes a widow, it is like living in an island. When she is married...then she is under the shadow of the man (security).

In an unpredictable outside world full of hostility, violence and fear, the inner world of the home comes to be defined as the world of protection, as a refuge from the outer one. The fear, hostility and violence of the inviolable private sphere are given a new meaning – protection. Domestic violence gets redefined as protection. Hence, all that is bad, wrong, violent and insecure is projected onto the Other, the ethnic outgroup which represents danger. This helps constitute the ingroup ethnic identity as good, secure, protective and desirable. In such ingroup/outgroup constructions, ingroup patriarchy receives a major boost by appearing benign. This is one form in which the violence of the war has led to increased violence upon women, and restrictions upon them are re-formulated as ‘protection’. Patriarchy is reproduced through violence at all levels of the conflict, from the personal to the political.

3. Cultural Sensitivity, Aid Programs and the Reproduction of Patriarchy

In the twenty-two year old Afghan conflict, a large number of international aid agencies poured millions of dollars for refugee rehabilitation and ultimate repatriation, as well as into humanitarian spheres. The United Nations and its various organs, in particular UNHCR, UNHRC and UNICEF, have been active in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s Frontier province, dealing with various aspects of the refugee situation, ranging from education, health and housing to income-generation and credit programmes. While foreign assistance personnel, and researchers on Afghan women, have been well meaning and humanitarian in their intent, their approach has occasionally been conservative, and their methods have inadvertently served to reinforce local patriarchies.

3.1 Going Through the Men - Arguments for Cultural Sensitivity

An argument that has been forwarded by some researchers, observers and aid officials is that it is important to be culturally sensitive in the process of service delivery to Afghan women because, if the men disapprove of their activities, they would withdraw their support for the programme. Sensitivity to culture and tradition has been recommended as a safe strategy that can enable an ‘entry point’ for aid personnel without disturbing cultural patterns. A number of writers on the topic have not problematized the notions of culture and tradition, and have reified and mystified them. There has been little recognition that capitulation to the dominant notions of ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ is a compromise with patriarchy, which is likely to find further endorsement of its oppression of women. When women are ‘helped’ in ways that support the status quo, the only people who are helped are the powerful males of the group. This kind of ‘helping’ does not bring about change, rather it reaffirms existing social and political arrangements which are detrimental to women. Aid personnel and writers on Afghanistan need to explore issues such as what is culture, who decides what culture means, who deploys it, against whom and how. Since ‘culture’ does not distribute power evenly among all actors, it needs to be challenged by an appeal to the universal right of all human beings to security, protection, food and a decent life. If ‘culture’ or ‘tradition’ refuse to involve women at the decision-making levels, they need to be questioned and not upheld in the name of ‘helping’. As the Vienna Conference of 1993 on human rights recognized, culture and tradition are the two most commonly used excuses for not granting women their human rights.

Hanne Christensen explores processes in which the income generating activities of women were redefined as serving the goals of *Jihad*, thus making such income palatable to tribal elders who reprimand men for

letting their wives earn or be seen in the market.⁵³ Women's income is regarded as dangerous to the established social order, a patriarchal order, which has been re-created in the refugee situation. Hence, all change or new ideas have to be re-defined in the terms of *Jihad* for ensuring acceptability by threatened and besieged patriarchies. However, this re-definition tends to reconstitute the gender boundaries and barriers regarded as necessary among Afghan families.

Sharon Krummel criticizes the assumptions that guide 'helping' programmes in medical and other forms of counseling by arguing that

*In most of these cases it is women's heavy domestic responsibilities – combined with inhibitions deriving from cultural factors – which prevent them from access to these programmes. Until recently...little effort has been made – either in camps or in cities and towns – to adapt them to the needs and schedules of women. The erroneous assumption has tended to be that it is by helping the male adult refugees that entire families are helped, whereas in reality there are many fewer refugee men than women, and it is usually the women whose roles within the families are the most central and influential.*⁵⁴

By 'going through the males', and assuming that it is better to work through 'the head of the household', such aid programmes reinforce the idea of male centrality and privilege. Krummel rightly points out that there are certain areas of the household that are mainly the responsibility of the women who are also more affected as refugees. However, there is a tendency among agencies to privilege adult males in the way in which they channel the aid. This may be partly due to the fact that in many households the only contact with the outside world is through men and children, but it is partly informed by the cultural sensitivity perspective which is afraid of 'annoying the men'. For example, in the provision of health services through female master trainers, 'motivators are selected with the agreement of male leaders within the community and are therefore able to attract the maximum number of participants.'⁵⁵

Krummel continues to argue that another flaw in the aid programmes is that many of them not only reproduce cultural determinist agendas, they also tend to construct all women as 'vulnerable' and as 'victims', thereby denying any agency that women may have, and which may be the source of resistance to dominant norms.⁵⁶ The notions of vulnerability and victimhood tend to reconstruct women in images of disease and weakness, which are props for patriarchy and justify the claimed necessity of male protection.

A strongly cultural determinist perspective is employed by Nancy Hatch Dupree, who seeks to explain the cloistering, veiling and secluding of Afghan women by resorting to arguments based on cultural specificity.⁵⁷ According to Dupree

Each culture must determine which paths to follow to attain these [dignity and self-esteem], keeping in mind the multidimensional character of women's traditional roles. Public participatory roles need not be measured by the standards of others...the means

53 Hanne Christensen. 'The Reconstruction of Afghanistan', p. 56.

54 Sharon Krummel. 'Refugee Women and the Experience of Cultural Uprooting'. p. 4.

55 Nancy Hatch Dupree. 'The Present Role of Afghan Refugee Women and Children', p. 7.

56 Sharon Krummel. 'Refugee Women and the Experience of Cultural Uprooting', p. 7.

57 Nancy Hatch Dupree. 'Women and Symbols: Trends and Reactions'. May 1990.

*some societies choose may jar Western ethno-centric cultural sensitivities, forgetting that Western female lifestyles are equally jarring to others.*⁵⁸

Dupree does not problematize ‘culture’ with the result that she ends up upholding the very norms, values and beliefs, which incarcerate women in most parts of Afghan society. She does not perceive culture as male boundary construction in the search for identity. She does not see culture, therefore, as fundamentally patriarchal. The conflict of universal human rights with cultural claims has been a core issue in human rights debates. However, a number of aid-oriented thinkers tend to fall into glorifying, upholding or otherwise legitimizing, what is claimed by the powerful groups as ‘indigenous’ and ‘authentic’.

In another paper on Afghan women refugees, Dupree refers to the construction of women as embodiments of male honour, but does not regard this as problematic. She writes that ‘Muslim societies throughout history have responded with greater protectiveness of women when faced with threats to their cultures for women are regarded as symbols of honour and the perpetuators of the cultural values of society’.⁵⁹ She also recognizes that the more insecure the men become, the stricter is the seclusion of women and their extra-domestic activities are denounced⁶⁰, but she takes these as givens without subjecting such practices to critical scrutiny. She argues that women themselves become more inclined to conform to traditional ideals governing public behaviour when their way of life is endangered.⁶¹ However, she does not explore the deeper dynamics of patriarchal control to grasp the underlying power and coercion in apparent conformity. Culture, as dominantly expressed and conceived, is seldom the creation of women. It is the informal culture of oral traditions including songs, poetry and dance in which women participate. In the next section, it will become more evident how this latter form of culture contains elements of resistance to patriarchy, and deep-rooted sources of agency among women.

In a paper on socio-cultural constraints affecting assistance programmes for women, Nancy Hatch Dupree recognizes that ‘the refugee situation initially strengthened overly-protective conservative attitudes toward women and discouraged refugee assistance planners from formulating programs to meet the specific needs of women.’⁶² However, with the passage of time, argues Dupree, ‘attempts are being made to capitalize on the unique opportunity mass gatherings of refugee women present for imparting health maintenance, education and income-generating skills’.⁶³ Dupree explains how the ‘legendary ferocity with which Afghan males protect their women, symbols of honour in each household, within each tribe, and by extension, for the entire Afghan nation, deterred the staunchest administrators’.⁶⁴ Afghan resistance to any foreign influence upon women was further strengthened after the Soviets tried to inculcate a different set of values through education. Dupree describes how many families fled the country when they perceived the state (Democratic Republic of Afghanistan) as encroaching upon the families’ domain by granting women rights and equality.⁶⁵ The act of fleeing was defined as ‘protecting the honour of the tribe and nation’. In conflict with a hostile Other Afghan identities, as represented in women’s bodies, were reconstituted more violently. While correct in her assessment of the Afghan male

58 Nancy Hatch Dupree. p. 13.

59 Nancy Hatch Dupree. ‘Afghan Refugee Women in Pakistan: The Psychological Dimension’. p. 43.

60 Nancy Hatch Dupree. ‘Afghan Refugee Women in Pakistan’. p. 43.

61 Nancy Hatch Dupree. ‘Afghan Refugee Women in Pakistan’. p. 43.

62 Nancy Hatch Dupree, ‘Socio-cultural Concerns Affecting Assistance Programs for Women Among the Afghan Refugees in Pakistan’, ‘Socio-cultural Concerns...’, summary.

63 Nancy Hatch Dupree, ‘Socio-cultural Concerns...’, summary.

64 Nancy Hatch Dupree, ‘Socio-cultural Concerns...’ p. 3.

65 Nancy Hatch Dupree, ‘Socio-cultural Concerns...’ p. 4.

reaction to women's programmes and rights, Dupree fails to subject notions of women as symbols of 'Afghan males/nation/tribe' to critical scrutiny.

Assistance programmes typically focus on immediate 'helping', and often overlook the negative long-term consequences of remaining within the dominant paradigms as articulated by the local patriarchies. In her critique of the way in which aid fosters dependency among the refugees, Dupree resorts to essentialist arguments by asserting that such dependency 'jeopardizes the very essence of Afghan culture'.⁶⁶ While she is right about the dependency that aid can engender, she refers to 'Afghan culture' as having some primordial, pre-given essence. To her, culture is thus static, rather than a perpetually re-constructed discourse.

Nevertheless, Dupree does acknowledge the unbridled violence that Afghan forms of patriarchy unleashes upon women who are involved in aid programmes. Young boys hurl insults at women who work in such programmes and inform family members that their wives and daughters are whoring in the streets. As a result, terror permeates the camps where self-appointed vigilantes protect a beleaguered and insecure Self against encroachment from aid agencies.⁶⁷ This kind of violence has deterred many a worker belonging to the UN or other agencies, but the remedy sought in refusing to employ women or dismissing them, has tended to reinforce the violence of male domination.

3.2 Cultural Determinism of Educational Interventions

Educational interventions are fraught with anxiety, especially since the attempted Sovietization of Afghan education, which was perceived by the conservatives as violating the basis of 'Afghan culture and tradition'. Religion has traditionally informed the Afghan curriculum, and of the total teaching time, between 44% and 52% is devoted to Islamic teachings.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, aid officials have argued that religious teaching can be used as an entry point for girls' education, even if such an education reinforces values that interventions are designed to reform. One of the ways in which an educational intervention has reinforced the values of *Jihad*, aggression and women's role within a patriarchal war, has been praised by Dupree in the following words:

*The Nazreen Primary School for Girls is a remarkable example of what can be done with individual commitment, dedication and courage. Begun with with an enrolment of 15, its student body numbered 130 during the 1982-83 school year. The curriculum includes a hefty dose of patriotic songs about the exploits of the Mujahideen...which are sung with fervor and gusto. These young pupils are certainly being imbued with a passionate belief in that important traditional role for women: to inspire and support their menfolk in acts of courage and bravery in defense of honor and nation.*⁶⁹

The kind of values that are here presented as unproblematically good and worthy of being upheld, are precisely the ones that sustain the war. Women's role as those who inspire men toward the war represents the co-optation of a suppressed group in the exploits of the dominant group – exploits which bear no fruits for women. For women the war has produced displacement, dislocation, loss of loved ones, poverty, begging, rape, violence and prostitution. There is no moral reason for tailoring education to a war that has devastated Afghanistan and the lives of its people. Furthermore, education reproduces

66 Nancy Hatch Dupree, 'Socio-cultural Concerns...'p, 9.

67 Nancy Hatch Dupree. 'Socio-cultural Concerns...'p, 13.

68 Nancy Hatch Dupree. 'The Present Role of Afghan Refugee Women and Children', p, 9.

69 Nancy Hatch Dupree, 'Socio-cultural Concerns...'p, 14.

women's subordinate role. As Dupree states, 'according to conventional beliefs, the knowledge a girl needs in order to fulfil her primary roles as wife and mother is found at home, not in secular schools where she may learn to question the primacy of male authority'.⁷⁰ Development interventions, ostensibly designed to create a more open and tolerant society, tend to reinforce local forms of domination and cultural violence, when they capitulate to the need to be 'culturally sensitive'. Even if such an education represents the only entry point for women's education, it needs to be shunned in favor of a more humane and peace-oriented education based on ideas of equality, since peace and equality are what most refugee women want, as indicated by their interviews. Dupree rightly states that current Afghan education is tailored to meet the needs of *Jihad*, and the rote learning of the Koran and other texts stifles the imagination, discourages independent thinking and precludes creative interpretation.⁷¹ Despite her recognition that the traditional curricula reinforce the values of war and women's subordination, Dupree ends up arguing that 'all fields can be addressed *without transgressing accepted traditional activities*'.⁷²

The recurring refrain of 'not transgressing tradition', 'working only with male consent and approval', and 'not upsetting accepted norms' in the writings of officials, activists and researchers like Dupree, may reflect a realistic understanding that it is very difficult to bring about a radical change in a complex society as steeped in masculine culture and tradition as Afghanistan. The pragmatic approach to gain access to women is described by Dupree during one of her visits to a refugee camp. She writes that

*After rapport was established with the male Afghans who crowded around us, a simple request to meet the ladies was met with typical Afghan hospitality. Because I was thus introduced to the household by members of their own families, the women felt free to come forth with their graciousness.*⁷³

The use of such strategies recognizes and privileges male domination and as such has limited, if not negative, effects on women. The fear of female education among Afghan men is observed by Haq who, in a report to the Women's Commission for Refugees, writes:

*Educational programs for women have been viewed with suspicion and associated with communism. Because of these constraints, educational and development programs directed towards women must be undertaken with caution, and after obtaining approval from male leaders in the camps.*⁷⁴ [Emphasis mine]

Making male approval a pre-condition for women's programmes would reinforce male privilege and power over women, thereby negating the very aim of educating women. In her recommendations to the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, Cynthia Lawrence Haq reiterates the culturalist stance by arguing that 'to ensure the support of male leaders, it is important that this forum be constructed *in a culturally sensitive way*'.⁷⁵ As regards teaching programmes, she continues her argument by saying that 'the role of education as enhancing the *Jihad*, and individual's abilities to serve others should be stressed...If ways of making education culturally acceptable can be found, the ability to reach women and children will be enhanced'.⁷⁶ Development programmes, as envisaged by the writer, would then not only

70 Nancy Hatch Dupree. 'The Present Role of Afghan Refugee Women and Children', p, 9.

71 Nancy Hatch Dupree. 'The Present Role of Afghan Refugee Women and Children', pp, 9-10.

72 Nancy Hatch Dupree. 'The Present Role of Afghan Refugee Women and Children', p, 14.

73 Nancy Hatch Dupree. 'The Women's Dimension Among Afghan Refugees in Pakistan', p, 1.

74 Cynthia Lawrence Haq. Report to Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. International Rescue Committee. March 1989.

75 Cynthia Lawrence Haq. Report to Women's Commission.

76 Cynthia Lawrence Haq. Report to Women's Commission.

strengthen local patriarchies, but also reinforce the problematic notion of *Jihad*. As mentioned in the second section of this paper, the conflict in Afghanistan is not perceived as *Jihad* by most women, but as a struggle for power and glory by militia commanders. Such development interventions tend to reinforce values that promote the war and make it appear holy and justified. The dominant patriarchal view of the war as *Jihad* would be strengthened by means of interventions designed to bring progress. Haq also recommends religious education, and the incorporation of religious teachers in curriculum development, to enhance cultural acceptability.⁷⁷ Writing from a cultural sensitivity and cultural acceptability perspective, Haq fails to problematize culture which she takes as a given. The so-called *Jihad*, and its attendant institutions such as *purdah*, seclusion and ‘honour’, are strengthening and re-creating precisely the kind of violent patriarchal ‘culture’ that is taken for granted in such arguments.

Despite the success of strategies which acknowledge male domination, it is disturbing that strategies which might enable one to overcome the constraints of male domination and ‘culture’, have not been imagined, suggested or tried, and the ideas of ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ have not been deconstructed. Innovative strategies focused on the state’s responsibility towards its citizens, Afghanistan’s signing of international rights treaties, and Afghan women activists’ perspectives, seem not to have formed the core of development thinking. At the time that most of this material was produced, it seems that development strategies for Afghan women had not taken full account of rights and politics as the basic space and pre-condition for development. Nicola Liv Johnston points out the limitation of the strategy that involves going through established power channels, by writing that ‘the Social Animators are advised to work with or through the power channels that already exist on the camps, so as not to create tensions, or conflicts with community leaders. However, since the leaders they are dealing with are all male, this again restricts communication possibilities for women’.⁷⁸ Strategies that reinforce existing power channels can become restrictive rather than enabling, therefore any strategy has to be devised with utmost care and attention to its unintended consequences.

3.3 Traditional Family Values, Patriarchy and the Future State

Nancy Hatch Dupree argues that were it not for traditional Afghan family values, women, especially widows, would have no protection or dignity.⁷⁹ However, this does not lead her to argue in favour of state formation and citizenship rights. It rather seems to lead her to uphold the ‘traditional Afghan family’, which performs the functions that a state is required to perform for its citizens. Absence of the state makes reliance on the patriarchal family more complete, and culture tends to operate through the family. This is an aspect which well meaning aid officials and researchers appear to have overlooked. The following words of Dupree betray her capitulation to the norms of the dominant culture and her failure to be critical of such norms:

The inviolability of the family is a cherished ideal defended by every Afghan. The war has produced confusion, forced readjustments and interrupted the routines of life in every major social institution and as perceptions of these affronts to the culture deepen, the more critical the traditional roles of the family become. As a consequence, the refugee experience has largely resulted in strengthening the concept of a three-generational

77 Cynthia Lawrence Haq. Report to Women’s Commission.

78 Nicola Liv Johnston. ‘Afghan Refugee Women: What Room for Manoeuvre?’ p, 36.

79 Nancy Hatch Dupree, ‘Socio-cultural Concerns...’p, 19.

*family as a societal imperative. This satisfies the need for in-group solidarity commanded by enmity toward hostile outside forces.*⁸⁰

It is difficult to believe that ‘every Afghan’ defends the ‘cherished ideal’ of the family as women are often controlled and beaten by their families. While Dupree is right about the way in which conflict and threat have heightened emotional investment in institutions of continuity, she does not differentiate this response by gender. For women, the situation is far more complex than the simple maintenance and perpetuation of ‘Afghan culture’, an essentialism at best because a pre-existing Afghan culture cannot be assumed. ‘Afghan culture’ is being articulated and established, and the current conflict is a constitutive part of its ongoing articulation as a separate and ‘proud’ culture. Although Dupree recognizes that ‘bonds preserving the integrity of the family are being tightened to confront the invasion of alien ideology’⁸¹ she finds the encroachment upon family bonds by the state in order to loosen the family’s reins on individuals, a violation of the family. However, she overlooks the way in which the family reduces women’s choices and diminishes the space for decision-making by imposing the control of men. While the state (DRA - Democratic Republic of Afghanistan) may have relied on women’s emancipation as an instrument to strengthen its own control, the absence of women’s individualized relation to the state is the basis of their being rendered at the mercy of ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ enacted through the family. In the conflict between the DRA and the Pashtunwali code, women became pawns in men’s battles for supremacy. Yet, the argument is made that grassroots programmes for women should be ‘culturally compatible’, which is another way of saying that they should be acceptable to patriarchy.⁸² Even after recognizing that it is patriarchy, even more than Islam, which inhibits women, Dupree falls short of arguing in favour of a democratic and representative state with universal equal citizenship, and instead supports a family structure that is primarily informed by patriarchal practices.⁸³

Dupree however concedes that the experience of exile, and the inability of men to engage in economic activity which has become a female responsibility, have led to marital discord,⁸⁴ and that such discord invariably means violence against women. The conflict has rendered women responsible for the continuation of the past and future. The demands upon motherhood have intensified to produce sons for *Jihad*, and women’s reproductive capacity has been increasingly appropriated by the various ethnic groups.⁸⁵ This has resulted in greater confinement, depression, illness, violence and frustration for women, thus belying the myth that the conflict has created spaces for women and has led to greater ‘mobility’.⁸⁶ In fact, as Dupree asserts, the ‘resurgence of fundamentalist attitudes toward women among the refugee population has placed these women in totally dependent positions. They simply cannot survive in Pakistan outside the family and must accept familial control. The conflicts are thereby exacerbated.’⁸⁷ As unequal members of the family, women suffer the most as a result of domestic conflicts heightened in conditions of exile and uncertainty.

However, Dupree concludes from her observations of enhanced familial control, and the resilience of family values despite social disintegration, that a modern nation-state can still be formed in Afghanistan even though such a state individualizes the relation of the citizen with the state. According to her

80 Nancy Hatch Dupree. ‘The Afghan Refugee Family Abroad: A Focus on Pakistan’, *Afghan Studies Journal*, p, 29.

81 Nancy Hatch Dupree. ‘The Afghan Refugee Family Abroad’, p, 32.

82 Nancy Hatch Dupree. ‘The Role of Afghan Women After Repatriation’, p, 25.

83 Nancy Hatch Dupree. ‘The Present Role of Afghan Refugee Women and Children’, p, 16.

84 Nancy Hatch Dupree. ‘The Afghan Refugee Family Abroad’, pp, 34-35.

85 Nancy Hatch Dupree. ‘The Afghan Refugee Family Abroad’, p, 36.

86 Nancy Hatch Dupree. ‘The Afghan Refugee Family Abroad’, p, 37.

87 Nancy Hatch Dupree. ‘The Afghan Refugee Family Abroad’, p, 42.

the Afghan family value system is flexible enough to adapt to changing requirements, and, inshallah, will survive the vicissitudes of the present crisis...There are those who would argue that many aspects of the traditional Afghan concept of family are too restrictive to permit "modernization". If one sheds Western precepts, it may be argued, however, that Afghan family values are not inimical to the establishment of a viable nation-state, particularly during the post-war period when centralized government services will be largely non-existent. It is then that the traditional function of the family as a support system will be most needed. Furthermore, as the forces of change vie with those of continuity, and the competition between tradition and modernity intensifies, any new regime would be well-advised to resolve conflicts by strengthening, not weakening, the family structure. Even if modified by the gradual weakening of the extended family and the subsequent rise in importance of nuclear families, the solidarity of family relationships should remain strong. [emphasis mine]⁸⁸

Even while recognizing how restrictive the Afghan patriarchal family forms are, especially for women, Dupree ends by upholding them and arguing for their continuity in the presence of the state. Strengthening the traditional form of family structure will mean strengthening patriarchy and not women. The presumed solidarity of the current family form overlooks the fact that Afghan families, like families elsewhere in the world, are riddled with conflict, inequality and women's subordination. The seeming solidarity may be more a myth that covers underlying violence, which silences the voices of women. Women have been killed in the name of so-called 'honour', a fact that hardly shows 'solidarity'. Instead of arguing that any future nation-state must adhere to the principles of international agreements to which Afghanistan is a signatory, researchers and aid officials seem to have fallen into the very categories of discourse that are constructed by Afghan patriarchies. The latter discourse enables Dupree to argue that since 'the refugee concentrations crowded together diverse tribal and ethnic groups from different geographic regions... women are consequently severely restricted...in addition, the natural tendency of threatened societies to overly protect women imposes strict restraints because in Afghanistan women are responsible for upholding family and national honour and perpetuating those social and cultural values the massive exodus seeks to preserve'.⁸⁹ While she recognizes that the exodus seeks to preserve 'family and national honour' for which women become responsible as well as victims, Dupree fails to subject to critical interrogation, the notions of family and national honour as constructed in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

However, Dupree does raise an important issue that is likely to become central after repatriation and reconstruction, and this shows her understanding of how patriarchies, in fact, do operate. Will women continue to be allowed to work outside the house for remuneration since this has been accepted as a *Jihad* related activity, or will they be forced to become confined dependants again? Will they be permitted to sell their items for money or will that be considered shameful if the war is no longer a reason for women's economically gainful activity? More importantly, as Dupree puts it, 'when the enemy has gone...who will be the object of their [males'] aggression? May it not take the form of restricting, or even oppressing women?'⁹⁰ These questions reflect an implicit understanding that war provides an outlet for aggressive impulses encouraged in most parts of Afghan male society. After the end of the war, aggression so fine tuned and incited among young males, is quite likely to turn toward women even more intensely. There are so many examples in history where women participated in liberation or war efforts and were exhorted to return to domestic tasks in the home after freedom was achieved. The independence of Pakistan,

88 Nancy Hatch Dupree. 'The Afghan Refugee Family Abroad', p. 44.

89 Nancy Hatch Dupree, 'The Role of Afghan Women After Repatriation', p. 6.

90 Nancy Hatch Dupree. 'The Role of Afghan Women After Repatriation', p. 20.

formation of the Palestinian Authority and the Algerian war of liberation, are some examples that immediately come to mind. This is the reason that wars and liberation struggles are so often not only classed, in the sense that it is mostly the lower class people who get killed, displaced, abducted or raped; they are also gendered in that it is women who suffer the severity of displacement, rape, abduction, and are responsible for providing for the family in adverse circumstances. Ultimately, women are the ones who gain nothing from the liberation.

While Dupree argues that there is no reason to push Afghan women into demanding the legal rights provided them in legal statutes, she supports non-political and non-formal meeting places for women to exchange views. This kind of argument would allow any future possible state in Afghanistan to abdicate its obligations toward its female citizens. The promotion of non-political and non-formal systems for women tend to push them out of the public sphere where they have been given rights which are not recognized. It makes much more sense to encourage women not to let the formal public sphere slip out of their grasp, and to prevail upon them to assert their citizenship fully in any future formation. A state based on exclusionary male citizenship will reproduce the patriarchy of *jirgas*, *shuras*, families and other male-centered forms of organization. While Dupree argues that 'if cultural sensitivities are respected, the future may be viewed optimistically'⁹¹, from the point of view of Afghan women, cultural sensitivities will mean veiling, confinement, forced marriage, forced reproduction and absence of choices in life. 'Cultures' can take a long time to change, but a start has to be made by interrogating the dominant culture with oppositional discourses, one of which can be derived from the notions of a democratic state. Citizenship in the contemporary democratic state ideally implies choices and equal opportunities.

Inger Boesen also falls into the trap of perceiving the 'traditional Afghan family' as a place of security for women. She argues that although women rarely own or inherit productive property, their existence ultimately depends upon the family. In exchange, they enjoy a comparatively secure existence since divorce is rare among the Pashtuns and a woman's rights and duties are transferred from her father's home to that of her husband.⁹² The denial of inheritance is violence in itself, let alone the beatings and control that women are subjected to in their daily lives. The fact that a woman is transferred from one house to another as part of property and chattel, means that her humanity is denied. What is problematic cannot be used as an argument for security, as the absence of divorce can also mean that women are denied the right to leave a violent husband.

While referring to women's role in Afghanistan's reconstruction, Boesen argues that women's traditional roles in the rural economy should be supported. In Boesen's view

On the background of traditional division of labour in rural households, coupled with the increased emphasis on purdah among refugees and resistance, it is to be envisaged that assistance to women must assume forms that are acceptable to the men and the local authorities (jirgas and shuras). This probably means that the programmes will have to accept purdah and segregation as well as the acting of men as middle-men in the case of income-generating programmes...The programmes should be compatible to kinship groups and community networks....[emphasis mine]⁹³

From such a perspective, there seems to be little hope that in a reconstructed Afghanistan, women's position will be any better than before. Reconstructing or reinventing tradition was imperative for Afghan

91 Nancy Hatch Dupree. 'The Role of Afghan Women After Repatriation', p, 27.

92 Inger W. Boesen. 'Afghan Women in Repatriation and Reconstruction'. p, 5.

93 Inger W. Boesen, 'Afghan Women in Repatriation and Reconstruction'. p, 14.

survival in a prolonged war with Others. While Inger Boesen recognizes that many Afghan women want rights, equality and franchise, she dismisses them as a small urban educated, upper class minority.⁹⁴ While this is true of many societies where the women's rights movements have been led by urban educated women, a large number of refugee women interviewed for the SDPI study seemed to want a modern state with equal citizenship rights. This will be further elaborated in the next section.

Boesen concludes her vision of a future Afghanistan with the pessimistic view that since

A strong central government of a conservative character is likely to be negative towards international...assistance specifically aimed at women...[support programmes for women] should, in any case, be carefully planned, respect cultural sensitivities, and [the existing programmes for women] must be carried out in complete understanding with the local community structures and authority bodies (jirgas and shuras)...The scale and structuring of the programmes should be designed to fit with existing local kinship and community networks as widely as possible, in order to function as extensions of traditional structures of support... [emphasis mine]⁹⁵

Boesen is right in that the Taliban regime had banned all work and education for women and was ultra-conservative as regards women's rights, however feminists need to take a position that challenges cultural sensitivity as an argument to deny women's rights. Cultural sensitivity is often sensitivity to males and to the *shuras* and *jirgas* composed entirely of men. Cultural sensitivity arguments tend to reify culture and exclude half of those who are also part of society. Boesen contends that on account of the traditional division of labour and *purdah* among women, 'assistance to women must assume forms that are acceptable to men and the local authorities (*jirgas* and *shuras*). This probably means that the programmes will have to accept *purdah* and segregation as well as the acting of men as middle-men in the case of income-generating programmes such as tailoring and handicraft programmes'.⁹⁶ As Afghanistan has signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the resort to cultural specificity (a capitulation to patriarchy) negates the spirit of these agreements.

Nicola Liv Johnston, despite an incisive understanding of how male patronage and power are reproduced through strategies that privilege cultural specificity, ends up capitulating to cultural determinism by arguing that 'Religious and cultural sensitivity is undeniably necessary, so as to avoid conservative backlashes...which block women's participation.'⁹⁷ While such strategies may work as initial steps towards reaching women, in the long run such tactics are likely to strengthen the very structures implicated in producing, maintaining and sustaining the war, and cultural forms that regenerate their power by means of conflict. In the long run then, women are likely to become more disempowered unless there is a responsive state machinery to protect and promote their rights.

3.4 Going Through the Women – New Directions for Aid Programmes

In her discussion of aid programmes, Hanne Christensen writes that 'very few agencies have female staff employed at the upper levels. The aid community has also been reluctant so far to attach particular importance to women's issues in the assistance programming, feeling it would damage the co-operation

94 Inger W. Boesen. 'Afghan Women in Repatriation and Reconstruction'. p, 10.

95 Inger W.e Boesen, 'Afghan Women in Repatriation and Reconstruction', p, 20-21.

96 See Nicola Liv Johnston who refers to Boesen's arguments in support of cultural specificity, pp, 45-46.

97 Nicola Liv Johnston, p, 46.

with resistance parties who function as implementing parties of projects both inside Afghanistan and in the camps in Pakistan.⁹⁸ Christensen reports that it is feared that giving high profile aid to women would shift the attention to women refugees, rather than refugees as a whole.⁹⁹ However, as she rightly notes, women are always present in the camp, or in the communities in Afghanistan, and it is very difficult for them to make ends meet when men are away at *Jihad* or are unemployed. Women therefore need to be involved in income related activities which would benefit the community as a whole, as they can be counted on for commitment based on their concern for their families.¹⁰⁰ Aid that goes to women is more likely to find its way to those who deserve it, than aid to men who can potentially use it for other reasons.

In October 1995, there were reports that some UN agencies were cutting back female staff on the demand of the Taliban movement. However, when some human rights groups raised concerns, the UN officials denied this and asserted that the UN was suspending its operations in areas where the Taliban had forbidden girls' schools. According to Evelyn Leopold, some female staff members of non-governmental organizations had asked what chance did they have when the UN itself was doing exactly what the *shuras* demanded.¹⁰¹ The spokesman for the World Food Programme, however, admitted that international agencies were dealing with a lot of male-dominated structures especially when it came to food because men would sell food to buy arms. Therefore, he reported, there were efforts to give food directly to women so that they and the children could actually receive it.¹⁰² Thus the UN realized the need to go through the women instead of the men to make sure that basic necessities reached the women and children. This is a lesson that other aid agencies and those concerned with 'helping' could well learn, so that instead of reinforcing the structures of power and privilege, aid can be channeled where it belongs.

It has been argued in this section that aid agencies and scholars working on the Afghan refugee issue, while well intentioned, tend to fall easily into the discourse of cultural sensitivity and specificity in the disbursement of aid. Such programmes, designed to appease the males and male-dominated structures such as *jirgas* and *shuras*, are liable to reproduce tribal patriarchies that deny the human rights of women. A feminist perspective needs to inform programmes designed for women in the refugee situation.

It has also been emphasized that while aid projects and programmes are needed as long as the situation of emergency and exile exists, in the long run there is no substitute for the state in providing rights to citizens, male or female. Instead of informal and non-political structures, the formal, legal and political structure of a democratic, plural, responsive and responsible state is the only viable answer to the fragmentation, dislocation, disintegration and destruction of Afghan society.

In previous sections, emphasis has been laid on the way in which a situation of statelessness that existed in Afghanistan, led to the people, especially women, being subjected to other forms of collective control either by the family, community, tribe or ethnic group. It has been argued that this 'traditional' or 'cultural' control is not sensitive to women's rights and a formal, legal state structure needs to be developed to ensure that women are regarded and treated as equal citizens, irrespective of the social collectivity to which they might belong. In the reconstruction of Afghanistan, women's groups will have to ensure that the state itself does not capitulate to patriarchal norms by incorporating the tribal structures such as *shuras* and *jirgas*.

98 Hanne Christensen. 'Women and their Households', in The Reconstruction of Afghanistan. p, 62.

99 Hanne Christensen, p, 62.

100 Christensen, p, 62-63.

101 Evelyn Leopold. 'Afghan women aid cut from UN jobs in Afghanistan'. Document created on November 10, 1995.

102 Reported by Evelyn Leopold. 'Afghan women aid cut from UN jobs in Afghanistan'.

Women themselves have not been passive observers of the situation. They have actively expressed agency in contesting dominant forms of cultural control and patriarchy. They have also consistently pressed for peace and security. It is time to turn to some of the forms in which women have resisted not only the perpetuation of war and bloodshed, but also the dominant male norms and values that sustain the culture of violence.

4. Afghan Women's Resistance to Violence and Patriarchy

Afghan women's active struggles against control, violation of rights and warfare are manifestations of their role as political and social agents, acting on their own behalf for peace, justice and equality. The word 'agency' has not been used in this paper as one pole representing the structure/agency polarity. Such dichotomies are reductive and restrict a wider understanding of the concept. The word 'agency' has been used here to refer to people engaged directly or indirectly in political or social action to subvert and overturn the dominant structures of society, whether expressed in family relations or through the war. It refers to the conscious choices that women have made to oppose the war, work for peace, challenge patriarchal controls and demand their human rights. Such engagements, at both the individual and collective levels, belie the commonly accepted stereotype of passive, fearful, subservient and quiescent Afghan women. Women in Afghanistan have not only actively formed organizations to press for their rights and ensure that their voices are heard, they have also taken individual initiative against personal oppression by family members.

The forms of resistance that Afghan women have employed range all the way from cultural ones, such as song and poetry, to the formation of organizations for women's rights at the collective level. The individual repudiation of the custom of *leverite*, that is, forced marriage to the husband's brother or cousin, has already been discussed above. A large number of women rejected such marriages despite family ire and social disapproval. Some theorists might even consider that suicide by women to save themselves from being captured and raped, is an act of agency. However, it is better to avoid such constructions as they are riddled with contradictions because if the act was committed to save 'family honour', this kind of 'agency' reproduces the very structure of values that oppress women. Resistance and agency will be used in this context to refer to only those acts of subversion and rejection, which do not reproduce dominant ideology, but rather challenge it.

4.1 The Little Awful One – Resistance in Cultural Form

A popular form of such resistance to dominant patriarchy is the singing of *landais*, poetic couplets that women sing to express their inner feelings, repressed desires and forbidden longings. While such couplets are occasionally sung in favour of the *Jihad* in which case they reproduce existing values, very often such couplets represent illicit desire and licentious cravings. For example, the couplet below is a strong expression of female desire

*Isn't there a single daring man in this village?
My flame-coloured pants are burning my thighs*¹⁰³

In this song, the woman provokes male daring, but the aim is to satisfy female passion. This kind of sexual reference to female body parts, steeped as it is in passion represented by flame-coloured pants, is indicative of deep desire normally forbidden to women. The couplet represents an overturning of the strict rules of sexual

103 Some of the *landais* (poetic couplets) have been taken from Inger W. Boesen's 'Women, Honour and Love'.

modesty and restraint imposed on women. It is, in a sense, a thwarting of patriarchy as it is a manifest transgression of the boundaries placed on female desire. By daring men to respond to the illicit invitation, the women challenge patriarchal power, as only a man willing to take risk would rise to the occasion. In an almost playful way, patriarchy is turned on its head as women are openly expressing passion, while men are implicitly afraid to rise to the challenge. This makes women more powerful, more able to transgress. Thus Erika Knabe's contention that consistent social, psychological and sexual emancipation is not a goal named by Afghan women¹⁰⁴, is questionable as resistance of this kind is evident in the women's universe.

The following couplet is an even stronger expression of female desire subverting the moral order imposed by patriarchal power.

*My beloved, hurry up and come to me!
The Little Awful One is asleep
And you can embrace me.*

The beloved is invited for sensual pleasure while the husband is asleep. In the Afghan, particularly Pashtun, patriarchal moral order, a wife would be killed for such an illicit liaison. However, through song and poetry among women, the sleeping husband (keeper of her morals) is mocked and the lover invited for forbidden pleasure. While it may be possible that what is forbidden in real life is enacted in song and poetry, it is also plausible that illicit liaisons do occur. The death of hundreds of women in so-called 'honour killing' shows not only the fear of men that women's desire is not in their own control, actual transgressions have also occurred. Although a great deal of so-called honour killing occurs because of property disputes and for pecuniary motives, it is not entirely incorrect to assume that transgression does take place. Women are not passive and there is no reason to believe that they subjugate themselves to the male moral order without a fight.

Most of these songs are sung by women when they work and gather among themselves. Older and younger women join in the singing together and form a network of solidarity among themselves. When other women know of an illicit liaison, they do not report to men. They thus develop links of mutual protection and understanding, links which male intrusion fails to break.

4.2 Individual Forms of Resistance

Apart from collective cultural forms through which women mock the dominant moral order, there have been instances of individual resistance by women. Women have taken risks to their lives by defying the Taliban militia blatantly. Pamela Collett relates a few such instances and they are reproduced below in the words in which they were originally narrated to her by Afghan women.¹⁰⁵

One story is about two ladies walking down a street in Kabul, Khirkhana district. A Datsun, full of Taliban, came by. They stopped the car, got out and started hitting the two ladies with rubber hoses filled with pellets. Why don't you wear chadori? (a complete covering from head to toe), they shouted. It is expensive, said the women. They covered their faces. The Taliban asked: why did you come out of your houses? The ladies started shouting back at the Taliban and threw their chaddars (large shawls usually worn covering the head and top of the body) away. Both of the women pulled off their chaddars. We don't want to wear even chaddar. The women's heads were completely

104 Erika Knabe. 'Women in the Social Stratification of Afghanistan', in *Commoners, Climbers and Notables*, p. 341.

105 Pamela Collett. 'Women of Kabul: Resistance to Taliban', November 13, 1996.

uncovered. All the people were watching and laughing at the Taliban. The Taliban got back in the Datsun and went away. My relative with a shop on the street saw it.

In another story related by Collett among several others, she describes what happened at a bank.

One lady had an adopted son. She came alone to the bank to get money. Taliban started shouting at her, why did she come alone to the bank? She replied that she needed money. She started shouting back at them. They started hitting her with the rubber hose with pellets inside. Maybe she was hurt too much. She started bleeding from her face. Someone took her to the hospital. She died there. Her son came back to the bank and asked where is my mother. Your mother is in the hospital. He went to the hospital and got the body. A friend of mine who was working in the bank before the Taliban came heard it from her brother who is still working in the bank.

Another woman said the following:

My friends in Kabul. Most of the ladies say that if the Taliban start abusing them, they will get ready themselves. They say we are ready if they start hitting we will hit them back. We cannot tolerate it if they hit us. If they do the same behaviour to us (hitting) we cannot tolerate this.

All such incidents, and many more that go unreported, clearly show how defiant and strong Afghan women's resistance has been. Hitting the Taliban back was fraught with danger because the Taliban were capable of murder as the second story shows. But the women's resolve seems to be remarkable, given the circumstances and the Taliban's ferocity. Such incidents were not isolated events but part of a much larger struggle being waged inside and outside Afghanistan for the liberation of the land from the Taliban. Women's resistance has also taken collective form in organizations that have raised the issue at international fora and meetings.

4.3 Collective Resistance by Afghan Women

The women of Afghanistan have formed several organizations for their struggles to establish a just, humane and equal social order in their country. Here the work of mainly two organizations will be discussed briefly as they are high profile and vocal. One is the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) and the other is the Afghan Women's Network (AWN). The interesting and remarkable aspect of Afghan women's movements is that while researchers, scholars and aid agencies from outside Afghanistan have argued in favour of 'cultural sensitivity', and re-defining women's work and education in terms of *Jihad*, the Afghan Women's Network and RAWA have consistently argued for a just, democratic, responsible and responsive state and an end to *Jihad*. At times the perspectives of Afghan women appear to be diametrically opposed to those of scholars and writers who base their arguments on cultural specificity. The Afghan Women's Network has consistently demanded women's human rights, legal guarantees, peace initiatives and women's inclusion in peace, and legal guarantees of women's equality. While scholars and writers from other countries, such as Dupree and to an extent Boesen, have tended to take notions of 'Afghan honour' and women as symbols of the Afghan family, community and nation for granted, Afghan women have tended to challenge patriarchy and speak from a universalist perspective of human rights and equality of all social groups. Also, contrary to the suggestions made by outsiders to tailor education to the *Jihad* effort, Afghan women have demanded education for peace and development. Contrary to Erika Knabe's suggestion that right to take the

ultimate decisions or to lead society, have not been challenged by women in Afghanistan¹⁰⁶, there is a definite movement for rights as internationally recognized.

Jamila, a war widow who was interviewed by SDPI researchers, places the responsibility for the calamity in Afghanistan squarely on the shoulders of the Taliban. As a refugee, she speaks from a position of women's rights and according to her

All the evil acts against women were committed by the Taliban. Women were raped, I feel ashamed even talking about it...If things remain like this then peace will not return. As long as the fundamentalists remain there is no chance...People should know their rights, especially women whose rights have been overlooked. Awareness should be created among the people. As long there is U.S and Russia peace will not return... The intellectuals have been killed in the name of Islam. Taliban performed an evil act by taking the women away.

This is how another interviewee, Masooma, expresses her vision of a future Afghanistan:

In my opinion, national leader should be elected one. I believe in elected members. That will be leader, national leader, who is elected as leader. Every one has his own idea. Some people will vote for one person, others will vote for another one. But it is not known what percentage is won by the candidate! Whether he is popular or not? This is the important point that government should be elected one. Women and men both should take part in the elections. It can be done only in a state of peace. Nothing can be done in a state of war. These neighbours should also agree to stop their interference. Foreign countries, America also interferes, Russia also interferes. Every one has its own interests in Afghanistan. If all of them agreed on peace, the peace may be restored just today.

Clearly, Masooma believes in a representative and elected government, in other words, she wants democracy, peace and women's equal right to vote. She does not believe that anything can be achieved in a state of war which is sustained by foreign interference. Masooma, who believes in the competence and strength of Afghan women, also demands educational, health and other rights for women. As she says,

We think that women can do so many things. Afghan women are competent. They are strong and have the ability to work. They can take step on the way to peace provided conditions are made conducive for them to work and facilities are provided to them. The NGOs for female, based here, also have financial difficulties. As I know, there are many women who need every thing. For example, they need projects for women. They need schools. They need clinic and health projects.

Shah Pari, a woman refugee at the Akora Khattak camp, says the following regarding the rights of women:

Look at the atrocities, which are committed against women. Restrictions have been placed on women. Women can't work outside. Who will earn for widow, she is not allowed to work herself. My husband and I used to work. We were self-sufficient but now women are not allowed to work outside. It was our women who worked with men to build our country. I request Taliban to end this bloodshed.

106 Erika Knabe. 'Women in the Social Stratification of Afghanistan', in Commoners, Climbers and Notables. p. 341.

Surraiyya, a refugee at the Nasir Bagh Camp, believes that women, whether educated or uneducated, have the brains, the ability and the right to work and support their families. As she says,

Women also wield power as men have power. They have rights... women also have rights! They have power to do this... As men work outside, women also work outside. The wife also has the right to support her children at home, and the husband also has the right to do this at home.... Educated also have the right. But it is not only for the educated one. Uneducated also have the right. She has the sense. She has the brain...She has everything. She should also do this. She has the power to think of her life.

Surraiyya thus believes that women have the power to think of their own lives independently. Such views about women are a far cry from the images that not only Afghan patriarchies but the international agencies also project to the world. The usual image is that of a dependent, helpless, cloistered and passive woman unable to think for herself and make decisions.

The following is an excerpt from the interview with RAWA activist Tahira:

RAWA is a small political organization, which works for the rights of women. It raises awareness in women so that they can defend their rights...The main objective of RAWA is to raise women's awareness to such all extent they can defend their rights and those of their countrywomen... our duty was to create awareness on women rights, teach the importance of education, all this was necessary to make women politically aware. It was important that women learn to read and write and talk about issues and express their views...With the arrival of Mujahideen completely changed. The first pressure came on women (lost their jobs) and women were degraded... We believe that human rights are violated in Kashmir and Palestine which are fully covered by the press in Pakistan but the violation of human rights in Afghanistan which is on much larger scale is not covered by the media. They don't mention Afghanistan. In Afghanistan life has been taken from the living. There is no such thing as human rights in Afghanistan specially women rights which doesn't exist at all. There are restrictions on her dressing, on how she should walk. In the past women earned for their families. During the war many families lost their men and the responsibility shifted to women to earn a living. Today women and girls are without education which means they can't help their families like before. Life is hard for women who were once bread earners for their families and today they are not allowed to work. This clearly shows how grim the situation is... The presence of Taliban/fundamentalists is responsible for all these problems... We were able to raise our voice against the fundamentalists. This year we had a demonstration in front of the UN office. Police told us that why didn't you ask for permission. We knew that the police allowed very little time and few people so we undertook the demonstration without their permission. We were prepared for any sort of disturbance. We had selected several speakers so that if one was attacked the other would take her place... The coming of women to political activities and gatherings is usually considered as a joke (not taken seriously). Recently RAWA activists went to people's houses to invite them to participate in the demonstration on human rights day because there is no such thing as human rights in Afghanistan. People showed their willingness to participate. Their only problem was when they were asked was traveling expenses, which was paid by RAWA.

-RAWA, which is supported by parties/organization and people inside and outside, was able to pay for their expenses. The money, which RAWA gets, is spent on the people... Many women who can't get permission to participate in our processions usually tell their families that they are going to a friend's house and thus join our demonstrations... We have members of every ethnic group. RAWA is working in every part of Afghanistan and has no favoritism regarding different races. All of our members are Afghans and that's important. For us it has the least importance to consider such matters... We believe that without women there can't be any progress but both, men and women, are equally important

RAWA's activism demonstrates the innovative and creative forms used by women to mobilize activists. For example, they had back up speakers in case the original ones were arrested. They defied bans on their activities and women who were not permitted by families to participate in demonstrations, did so on some other pretext. Collective and creative resistance by RAWA members is exemplary given Afghanistan's dangerous situation. While those who turn a scholarly gaze upon them as objects of pity and welfare, recommend help without violating so-called 'cultural sensitivity', Afghan women activists demand human rights, women's rights and ethnic harmony of all groups. Women activists want the freedom of speech, expression, association and political protest. They do not make arguments from the point of view of 'cultural specificity'. It is important to consider the women's own point of view in any intervention in Afghanistan.

The universality of human rights means that rights should be granted irrespective of culture, ethnic belonging, religion or any other 'cultural' or 'traditional' differentiation. However, the guaranteeing of rights is state responsibility and a situation in which a responsible, democratic state does not exist (despite the claim of various militias to the contrary), rights are difficult to ensure. Any future state in Afghanistan will have to take into account the fact that it is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of human rights as well as CEDAW. The state will have to ensure that there is no discrimination against any group based on social identity markers such as gender, religion, ethnicity, class or sect. The Afghan women are demanding universal, inclusive citizenship, which is the only route to the enjoyment of rights in a representative state. Those who argue that group cultural rights should prevail over individual citizen rights, violate the fundamental principle of human rights, that is, that each person has the right to life, security, liberty, speech and expression and belief, *regardless of her/his membership of any social, religious or cultural collectivity*. In any conflict between the individual's rights to life, liberty and security, on the one hand, and the group's rights to culture and tradition on the other, the individual citizen's direct relationship to the state requires that citizenship rights be upheld. Group cultural or religious rights should only be exercised in so far as they do not violate an individual citizen's fundamental rights. This idea is based on the principle that citizenship constitutes the largest and most important collectivity as it includes all social groups. As an inclusive collectivity, it should override membership in a smaller collectivity in case of a conflict of interests between the two. Hence, the state must protect a woman (right to life, liberty, security etc.) against 'honour killing' (claimed group/cultural right to kill).

The Afghan Women's Network, established in October 1995, has taken similar positions on women's rights. The Network regards the following as its major goals:

- To encourage the Afghan community, especially women, to participate in the peace process.
- To advocate internationally for the participation of women in the peace process and ensure women's human rights to employment, education and security.

While referring to Article 3 of the UDHR which grants everyone the right to life, liberty and security, the Afghan Women's Network argues that 'The term EVERYONE includes women. Women must have these human rights but they are being denied by the ongoing war. To exercise our basic human right to life, liberty and security, we must be involved in the peace process.'¹⁰⁷

The Afghan Women's Network distributed Peace Questionnaires to find out what most women think about creating peace. Interestingly, in sharp contrast to the arguments made by cultural determinists, many women replied that the subject of 'peace' should be included in the school curricula. It is ironic that while Afghan women want education to be tailored to peace, scholars and aid agencies recommend a curriculum based on *Jihad*, war songs and patriotism of an uncritical variety.

In a letter to the UN Human Rights Commission, the Afghan Women's Network wrote that 'the fate of Afghanistan should not be decided without including the interests and needs of the majority of its people, that is, the women. The UN must ensure that Afghan women are represented in the peace process and play a role in all decision-making.'¹⁰⁸ Afghan women have demanded inclusion in the peace process as well as in any future state. They have not asked to be 'culturally sensitive' to Afghan males and ensure that women are kept 'either in the home or in the grave'. While condemning Taliban atrocities against women, they have demanded the rights to work, health and education as state responsibility. In a letter to the UN Human Rights Commission, the Afghan Women's Network criticized the recognition of a Taliban delegate to the Habitat II conference in Istanbul. According to the Network, 'by sponsoring a Taliban to attend the Habitat II conference, the UN gave credibility to an illegitimate occupying force who does not represent the local people'.¹⁰⁹ Arguing that the UN should instead support the struggle of Afghan women for human rights, AWN argues that in all areas where the UN is working, there should be women to ensure the right of employment. They also state that they would not return to Afghanistan unless the rights to education, work, health and security are guaranteed to every Afghan woman and child. AWN also takes a stand against social regulation by the Taliban in determining how women should, dress, walk, behave and carry themselves.

Pressing upon the UN to include Afghan women in all the delegations for peace, AWN argues that 'We cannot expect military factions like the Taliban to understand and accept the requirements that women work in offices, *if the official UN delegations have no women members. We have urged that EVERY international delegation, whether UN, donors or NGOs should include women.*'¹¹⁰ The Network made a strong appeal to the member states of the UN to avoid giving recognition to an illegitimate faction that had illegally taken over Afghanistan. In a strongly worded statement, they write that: 'We urge all member states of the UN General Assembly NOT to recognize the Taliban or any other military faction as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Although the Taliban control the largest geographic area, they are a military faction that has imposed their rule by force not by the participation and acceptance of the Afghan people. They have imposed a particularly brutal regime that has placed women and girls under siege.'¹¹¹ Until the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent war in Afghanistan, only Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan had recognized the Taliban as a legitimate government. While the people, especially women, want a democratic and representative regime in Afghanistan, the interests of external powers, especially Pakistan, seemed to lie with an illegal military faction that claimed

107 Letter from the Afghan Women's Network to Ambassador Mestiri. April 7, 1996.

108 Letter from the Afghan Women's Network to the UN Human Rights Committee, June 9, 1996.

109 Afghan Women's Network (AWN), letter to UNHRC, June 9, 1996.

110 Statement by the Afghan Women's Network, October 13, 1996.

111 Statement issued by the Afghan Women's Network, October 13, 1996.

to represent the Afghan people. This is not only a travesty of justice, it is contrary to the principles laid down in human rights charters according to which the people are sovereign and their will is supreme.

On the other hand, well intentioned but misguided scholars, aid officials and writers have also failed to take into account the demands of the people who want peace, education, development and a representative elected government. A large number of the refugee women interviewed seemed to be yearning for the return of peace, democracy, education and a representative system in Afghanistan. They do not accept any faction as legitimate or the legal government of Afghanistan. The tendency of 'helpers' to 'go through the men and not annoy the males', however important given the difficult circumstances and a jealously guarded patriarchal order, has not been fruitful from the point of view of Afghan women, and those who want unity and ethnic harmony in the country. Illegal and illegitimate military factions derive strength and reinforcement from interventions that privilege *them* over the rest of the population.

In a letter to Senator Hank Brown, the Afghan Women's Network argued that 'one excuse for leaving women and girls out of the peace process is that the warring Afghan factions will never agree to a ceasefire and an interim government if women's and girls' human rights are part of the package. But if they won't agree to some very basic human rights, women and girls are not at all safe in Afghanistan and the state of conflict will continue with women and girls as the victims...there can be no lasting, secure peace leading to rehabilitation of Afghanistan without the participation of women. We want to participate in rebuilding our country, but we can only do so if our basic human rights are acknowledged and protected.'¹¹² The Afghan Women's Network strongly believes that without women's participation, it is not possible to reconstruct Afghanistan and build lasting peace and security for everyone. They oppose culturalist arguments for the exclusion of women from equal citizenship rights on the basis that such a step would fail to bring security for women and girls. As the Network states, women are 'being attacked and beaten for no reason except the fact that they are women'.¹¹³ Writing strongly in support of AWN's stance that unless women's rights are respected, there can be no lasting peace, the Centre for Women's Global Leadership states:

*The United Nations must therefore emphasize that where women must fear for their physical security simply for leaving their homes, no peace exists. Where girls can receive an education only clandestinely, in fear of the consequences, no peace exists. Where a diversion from strict dress code is punished by public beating in the presence of children, no peace exists.*¹¹⁴

Women, internationally, seem to have re-defined the very term 'peace' by emphasizing that unless there is war on groups of people residing inside the territorial jurisdiction of the state, there can be no peace. Peace is not just between two states, or between two warring factions, rather peace to be complete and real, must ensure the security and liberty of social groups against whom there is discrimination. The kind of repressive peace imposed by the Taliban was a recipe for disaster. When peace becomes an instrument of violence and injustice, it is only the prelude to a new conflict. Hence, the notions of peace, human security and people's security have much wider connotations, and much greater implications than the mere cessation of hostilities. The guarantee of the human rights of all, especially women, is the only road to viable and durable peace. For such peace to be established, a representative and responsive state

112 Afghan Women Network's letter to Senator Hank Brown, June 26, 1996.

113 Statement by the Afghan Women's Network, October 13, 1996.

114 Center For Women's Global Leadership. The State University of New Jersey, Rutgers. Letter to His Excellency Ambassador Jose Ayala Lasso, High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Center for Human Rights. October 17, 1996.

is required. As Safia Siddiqi and Farida Stanikzai argue, ‘only in an environment of justice and democracy can women enjoy their fundamental freedoms and human rights and maintain their status as equal members of the family’.¹¹⁵ A democratic state is thus a necessary pre-condition for the guarantee of fundamental human freedoms and rights of all citizens.

In this section, the myriad forms of women’s resistance to patriarchal domination and against war, have been highlighted. Women’s active opposition to both the war, and to one of its terrifying consequences in the form of heightened patriarchies, shows that women have not stood by like passive spectators. They have expressed agency in terms of their resistance at both the individual and collective levels. Their resistance has taken the forms of song and poetry, as well as political action at the national and international levels. Afghan women reject military expressions of patriarchy as legitimate government. The one thing that stands out clearly from women’s resistance is that women want peace, human rights, justice, equality, democracy and an elected, legitimate government. In other words, women reject the rule of military factions and want a state that is democratic and accountable to its citizenry.

5. Summary and Reflections

In this paper, it has been argued that conflict is one of the means by which identity is re-formed and re-created. Identity, whether ethnic, sectarian or national, is never an already formed, pre-given and eternal fact. It comes into being, and is perpetuated, by a constant reiteration, reconstruction and re-definition. The various systems of knowledge, mainly the media and education, play a role in creating an object called ‘ethnic identity’ in discourse. Identity is thus a contested idea which has to be persistently renewed by appeals to primordial or ancient origins, and the threat of annihilation. It is thus formed in conflict with, and in opposition to, all Others perceived as enemies hostile to one’s very existence. In the constant re-articulation of ethnic and ethno-national identities, new elements may be added, in particular elements from religion that help legitimize an ethnic formation. Similarly, certain elements may be repressed or denied if they no longer serve the purpose of identity formation. However, the process of the formation of identity is not uncontested. It is perpetually challenged from outsiders as well insiders who feel imperfectly or unequally included in the collectivity. The violent re-assertion of identity becomes imperative and results in the murder of those who transgress the boundaries set by the leaders.

It cannot be assumed that the struggles in Afghanistan represent conflicts between already-existing ethnic groups. Rather, the groups are re-forming themselves into ethnic formations precisely through the conflict. The majority Pashtun group, re-articulated as the Taliban identity, absorbed elements of religion into itself, in the process of strongly asserting Pashtun values and norms. The conflict enabled them to impose Pashtun patriarchal norms dressed up in the rhetoric of religion. The actions of the Taliban, in fact, often violated accepted religious norms.

Dominant ethno-nationalist identities, which presume and enforce a false homogenization upon a diverse social entity, tend to be aggressively masculine and violently patriarchal in their need to eliminate all difference, all division and all multiplicity. Pashtun identity has been formed by means of a violent suppression of women and the minorities. Pashtun forms of patriarchy rests on the invisibility of the

115 Safia Siddiqi and Farida Stanikzai, Daccar Sewing Project. Field Report. April, May 1996. Also see Elisabeth Eide and Terje Skaufjord, (1991). *From and During Times of War to Aid for Reconstruction and Development*. Seminar Report. Norwegian Afghanistan Committee, Peshawar. In this report Afghan women participants have expressed the desire for a state, rights, women’s voices to be heard and women’s involvement in all aspects of public political life.

women of the group. This invisibility has been imposed by excessively violent means including rape, murder, mutilation and terror. The Afghan conflict was thus a war of the reproduction of ethnic (mainly Pashtun) patriarchy, premised on the absence of women from the public terrain of power and politics. The relegation of women to the domestic sphere, and their construction as symbols of male, tribal and national honour, while common to all patriarchies around the globe, took on heightened and urgent meanings in the Afghan context. In a war of male supremacy against other groups, it is women who were the battleground, and it is they who were declared to be in need of protection (read *pardah*). It is again women of the opposition group who must be violated, raped and humiliated in a bid to defeat the opponent in the battlefield of male honour.

The war led to greater restrictions being imposed on women by means of *pardah* and limits on their mobility. In a recomposition of patriarchy in the refugee camps, women are beaten, sometimes just for becoming the breadwinners. It may be time to take a second look at an argument sometimes made by feminists that conflict opens up spaces for women and increases mobility while lessening *pardah*. This decomposition is quickly reversed by a compensatory response of heightened controls on women's freedom. As soon as the threat to 'culture' or 'tradition' is sensed, women's freedoms are the first to be curtailed. It is argued, therefore, that culture and tradition, as dominantly expressed, are not mere props that hold up patriarchy, they are the constituent elements of patriarchal control. It is dangerous to reify culture and tradition and support them uncritically as the right of a group. In the case of a clash between the group's right to culture and women's right to life, liberty and security, it is the latter that feminists may need to uphold. Culture *is* patriarchy and not a mere reflection of it. It has been noted that there is a tendency among observers and scholars to argue from a position of cultural determinism. Even UN agencies may fall into the inadvertent reinforcement of a virulent masculine culture of murder and violence. This trap has to be avoided by exploring the alternative aid strategy of 'going through the women', as long as there is no viable state to ensure women's rights.

Afghan women are not passive observers of the reproduction of a violently ethnic patriarchy, rather they have actively opposed and resisted it, not only through song and poetry, but also through political activism at the individual and collective levels. They have used 'culture' in the sense of cultural production of poetry and song, to subvert the dominant morality designed to contain female sexuality. Women have transgressed the limits imposed by patriarchy not only in fantasy, but also in real life at the risk of death. They have challenged the dominant meaning systems, and redefined what is meant by custom and tradition, in their active rejection of the custom of *leverate*.

At the collective levels, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan and the Afghan Women's Network have taken strong stands against Pashtun and other patriarchies, especially the Taliban. Such organizations have openly demanded a democratic state, equality and human rights for all social groups including women. They have asked for an end to the war and for processes of state formation to include women without whom peace will forever elude the embattled country. In sum, women have asked for universal, inclusive and non-discriminatory citizenship. They have defied and rejected what is presented as 'culture' or 'tradition', but in reality conceals control and domination. While there are those who might argue that women who take such stands represent a small, urban, educated minority, a large number of poor, refugee women interviewed for the SDPI study, expressed the same longing for peace, harmony, unity, equality and a plural, democratic state. It is clear, from an examination of the interviews, that women do not gain from the war, they only lose. It is equally clear that patriarchy gains – males get power, positions, money and the opportunity to rape, plunder and express masculine prowess.

The Afghan war, like all wars, is classed and gendered. It is only the powerful commanders and leaders who gain, while all others lose. The poor, the minorities, peasants, workers and women only lose. It is the powerless sections of society that are most affected as they lose their livelihood, lands and homes. A large number of rich and powerful families escaped to other countries. Most of the refugees (almost 80%) are women and children. Women of all classes, even privileged ones, have lost from the war which reproduced restrictions and controls that exceeded any that previously existed. In agreement with the women of Afghanistan, it is asserted therefore that unless women's rights are ensured within the context of a democratic and representative state, peace will not return to Afghanistan even if hostilities cease.

Postscript. This paper was written prior to the events of September 11, 2001. Some changes have been made for the final draft. However, the post September 11, 2001 scenario makes it imperative that the impact of the fall of the Taliban and the makeshift government imposed by the so-called Coalition Against Terror, be analyzed and understood from a feminist perspective. The morally unjustifiable bombing by the United States killed many civilians and made refugees of more women and children. The new order in Afghanistan has been manufactured by Western countries in Bonn, Germany and is likely to fail unless endorsed by the majority. This kind of forced peace imposed from the outside, can often become the basis of further conflict. The Pashtun ethnic majority is not likely to accept the domination of the Northern Alliance in the current government for long. The atrocities of the Northern Alliance during their rule should also not be forgotten. The presence of Western powers for their own vested interests in the vast oil and gas resources of Central Asia and the Caspian Sea, cannot be overlooked. The issue of women's inclusion in the future set-up has also been a subject of controversy. Further research needs to address the changed power balance not only in the region, but also globally. Particular attention will have to be paid to how the new power alignments specifically affect the issues of democracy, rights and gender.

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