

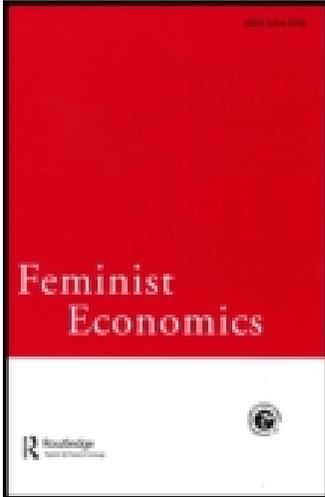
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### Cultural Values or Universal Rights? Women's Narratives of Compliance and Contestation in Urban Afghanistan

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# CULTURAL VALUES OR UNIVERSAL RIGHTS? WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF COMPLIANCE AND CONTESTATION IN URBAN AFGHANISTAN

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*Naila Kabeer and Ayesha Khan*

## ABSTRACT

There has been an ideological tug-of-war over women's place in Afghan society from the early years of the twentieth century between the modernizing tendencies of its urban-based elite and the forces of conservatism represented by the Islamic *ulema* (religious leaders). Following the US-led invasion and the international donor community's subsequent efforts to "develop" the country, this struggle has acquired a new lease of life. Current debates reproduce the now familiar divide between cultural values and universal rights that characterizes the wider feminist literature. While Afghan voices have been part of this debate, they tend to be drawn from more educated and politicized groups. This paper uses the narratives of a small group of Afghan women from poorer urban households to explore how they evaluate the changes that have taken place in Afghan society and where their views position them in the ongoing debates.

## KEYWORDS

Microfinance, culture, intrahousehold bargaining, economics of the family, empowerment, gender

JEL Codes: R2, Z1

## INTRODUCTION: DEBATING WOMEN'S PLACE IN AFGHAN SOCIETY

The question of women's place in Afghan society has, since the early years of the twentieth century, been characterized by an ideological tug-of-war between the modernizing tendencies of its urban-based elite, the forces of conservatism represented by the Islamic *ulema* (religious leaders), and the country's various tribal communities that are largely governed by their own customary laws (Maliha Zulfacar 2006). This tug-of-war has taken on an increasingly international character in recent decades. The rise to power of a Soviet-backed regime in 1978 and the subsequent Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–89) were associated with efforts to emancipate women.

The ensuing conflict was won by the mujahidin, backed by the United States and its allies, who swept into power in 1992, ushering in one of the worst periods of lawlessness and human rights abuses in the country's history. They were in turn ousted in 1994 by Taliban forces largely drawn from ethnic Pashtuns who make up 42 percent of the country's population. The Taliban imposed an extremely harsh version of the *Shar'ia*, which, as [Deniz Kandiyoti \(2005\)](#) discusses, owed as much to rural Pashtun norms as it did to Islam. Women faced particularly severe restrictions on their basic freedoms: to move, to work, and to be educated.

The US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 saw the overthrow of the Taliban and the installation of the Karzai regime. Backed by the international community, the question of women's rights has occupied a prominent place in current efforts to construct a modern, democratic state in Afghanistan. The new constitution recognized women's legal equality; a Ministry of Women's Affairs was set up in 2002 to deal with gender issues; while the mandate of the new Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) explicitly included women's rights. A variety of donor-funded programs and projects have also reached out to women, including through the promotion of livelihoods through microfinance activities.

The externally led character of these interventions has given rise to fresh debates about gender relations and women's position in Afghan society, which has reproduced the familiar divide between universal rights versus cultural relativism evident in the wider feminist literature. This debate – echoed, for instance, in the edited collection by [Susan Moller Okin \(1999\)](#) – lies between those who believe that efforts to improve the position of women must be negotiated on the basis of local cultural values and those who believe that it must be grounded in the universality of women's rights.

The view that change is essential is shared by many on either side of this ideological divide. The statistics attest to the extreme forms of gender inequality that characterize Afghan society ([World Bank 2005](#)). Afghanistan has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality in the world (1,600 per 100,000 live births), among the lowest rates of contraceptive prevalence (4 percent), stark gender disparities in education (adult literacy rates for men are 32 percent, compared to 11 percent for women), and only 13 percent of women as economically active in 2000 compared to 81 percent of men.

Where opinions diverge is with regard to the model of change envisaged. Some contest Western depictions of Afghan culture as uniquely oppressive to women and highlight the importance of local culture and religion in shaping Afghan women's values and worldviews. Lila Abu-Lughod, for instance, questions whether "emancipation, equality and rights" constitute a universal discourse of gender justice (2002: 787). She suggests that women in contexts like Afghanistan might give greater priority to other values, such as closeness

with family and cultivation of piety: “they might be called to personhood, so to speak, in a different language” (788).

Sultan Barakat and Gareth Wardell (2002) argue that those who view Afghanistan through “a Western feminist prism” tend to take women’s absence from the public domain as evidence of their subordinate status, overlooking the private domain of family and kinship where Afghan women exercise most influence. Consequently, they fail to account for the claims and obligations that underpin women’s influence within the family as well as the important role of patriarchy in providing them with shelter, status, and security. The revered place assigned to women within local culture is upheld by Qur’anic teachings, while Afghan women themselves claim to exercise considerable power within the domestic domain. Barakat and Wardell suggest that, regardless of differences of ethnicity, location, and class, women’s roles as wives and mothers are central to their identity and take primacy over other possible roles.

Others see family and kinship relationships as simultaneously the key source of women’s well-being and security as well as the primary structure of their oppression. Huma Ahmed-Ghosh (2006) argues that the so-called complementarity of gender roles in Afghan society disguises women’s extreme economic dependence on men in the household and their inability to speak and act on their own behalf. She argues strongly in favor of women’s economic empowerment through education and employment premised on a discourse of basic rights. Valentine M. Moghadam (2002) similarly questions the benign view of women’s status within the family. She points out that within the patriarchal culture of Afghan society, women may indeed be honored as mothers; but this is primarily as mothers of *sons*. She strongly rejects the politics of cultural relativism and calls for a transnational feminist politics unified around basic rights to education, income, and reproductive choice.

These debates clearly offer contrasting evaluations of the consequences of patriarchal constraints for women’s voice, status, and influence in Afghan society. However, Afghan women and men whose views on such issues are reported in recent studies tend to be those who are already politically active or prominent within development or women’s organizations in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> We know remarkably little about the views and values of the ordinary women – and men – who are the subject of these debates. It is this gap in the literature that our paper seeks to address.

## CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT IN THE AFGHAN CONTEXT

The research project on which this paper is based is part of a larger multi-country program of research into possible pathways of empowerment for

women living under different sets of patriarchal constraints.<sup>2</sup> Our research in Afghanistan had initially set out to explore the extent to which women's access to microfinance provided a pathway to empowerment in a country in which women hitherto had very few economic opportunities. We relied on loosely structured interviews with women borrowers to capture their views about the impact of microfinance and locate it within the broader context of their lives.

However, even a preliminary reading of these interviews made it clear that, given the turbulence of the country's recent history, access to microfinance was only one – and by no means the most significant – of the many changes that women in Afghanistan had experienced. Accordingly, in this paper, we use women's narratives, and those of some of their family members, to explore the impact on their lives of the various forces of continuity and change that have characterized the transition from prolonged conflict to a precarious post-conflict situation: how did women view themselves and their place in society, and to what extent do their narratives speak of compliance with, or dissent from, existing cultural norms – particularly when these were considered to be unjust? We use this analysis as a vantage point from which to revisit the larger debate about women's rights and cultural values.

Moghadam (2002) has pointed out that the structures of family, kinship, and community in Afghanistan conform in many ways to John C. Caldwell's (1978) description of the "ideal-typical" family structure that characterizes the regional belt – described by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) as "the belt of classic patriarchy" – stretching from northern Africa across the Middle East and the northern plains of South Asia to Bangladesh. Family structures within this region can, with some variation, be characterized as "extended, patrilineal, patrilocal, patriarchal, endogamous and occasionally polygynous" (Caldwell 1978: 558). To this description, we should add that these societies are also characterized by norms of *purdah*, or female seclusion, which impose strict controls over women's mobility.

In the context of Afghanistan, these structures are rooted in a society that is made up of various ethnic/tribal groups engaged in nomadic pastoralism, herding and farming, and settled agriculture. The dominant organization of family and kinship is along corporate patrilineal lines, with inheritance and descent traced through the male line, leaving women with little property of their own. Women leave their natal home on marriage and are assimilated, along with their children, into the husband's patrilineal group. Their position within marriage is bound up with their capacity to produce sons to carry on the family name and later in life they gain some authority as mothers-in-law (Carol J. Riphenburg 2003).

Social norms linking family honor to women's virtue lead to highly restrictive codes of behavior for women and a marked gender division of roles and responsibilities. Men are given primacy in the public sphere and

are responsible for providing materially for the family, upholding family honor through the protection of women's virtue, and exercising authority in family decision making. Purdah norms curtail women's mobility in the public domain and confine them to roles and responsibilities that can be carried out within or near the home.

While certain practices – such as extent of mobility in the public domain and rates of economic activities – vary by class, ethnicity, and location (Barakat and Wardell 2002; World Bank 2005), what cuts across these variations is women's marked dependence on men for economic needs and social protection and their vulnerability to what Mead Cain, Syeda Rokeya Khanam, and Shamsun Nahar (1979) term "patriarchal risk." This refers to the likelihood of abrupt declines in their economic welfare and social status should they find themselves bereft of male guardianship. A paradoxical effect of the risks and uncertainties attendant on women's subordinate status within "classic patriarchy" has been women's greater incentive to comply with, rather than challenge, male dominance and to manipulate the norms of male obligation and protection to shore up their own position within their families (Kandiyoti 1988).

However, it is not only the strength of their material stake in the system that has kept women locked into a subordinate position. It is also the fact that both men and women develop their sense of selfhood and social identity through the enactment – and internalization – of familial discourses that construct dominant norms of masculinity and femininity in terms that stress their mutual, though highly asymmetrical, interdependence. These give rise to an understanding of claims and obligations that are generated through, and embedded within, the social relationships of kinship, family, and community (Suad Joseph 1997).

Such an analysis would appear to provide strong support to the cultural relativist perspective that local norms and values give meaning and stability to the lives of men and women in Afghan society. It is difficult to see how women would protest or even perceive injustice, when these injustices are ingrained in the social relationships that construct their sense of selfhood and social identity. Yet Afghan society is neither static nor homogenous. Efforts to "modernize" women's status are by no means confined to the present regime, but go back to the early twentieth century. Prolonged conflict of the kind that Afghanistan has gone through in recent decades has the potential to open up possibilities for change that would not have been conceivable in "normal" times (Rita Manchanda 2005). As a report from the United National Research Institute for Social Development notes:

The upheaval of war, in which societies have been transformed and livelihood systems disrupted, in which women have assumed certain roles for the first time or come into contact with new ideas, has its

own impact on intra-personal relationships and societal expectations. (UNRISD 2005: 233)

How valid, then, is it to speak of “Afghan culture” as though it has survived intact and pristine through these turbulent years? And how likely is it that women – and men – in Afghanistan have remained impervious to the upheavals of war and subsequent efforts to bring about change? We sought to remain attuned from the outset to the highly specific ways in which existing patriarchal structures play out in different social contexts. Such structures do not merely set out the constraints within which women and men must live their lives, but also shape the possibilities for change and the form that this change is likely to take: as Naila Kabeer (2008: 8) points out, there is likely to be a “path dependence” to pathways of change in women’s lives.

Consequently, while we agree that the concept of empowerment lends itself to many different interpretations (Cecilia Sardenberg 2009), we would argue that in highly restrictive patriarchal societies like Afghanistan, it needs to be conceptualized in ways that capture the subtle shifts in consciousness, the incremental changes in agency that are likely to signify some shift in underlying power relations – even if these changes fall well short of “liberating women from the chains of gender oppression” (Sardenberg 2009: 5).

## METHODOLOGY AND BACKGROUND

This was a qualitative research study. Our respondents were all selected from the membership of BRAC and Women for Women International (WfW), two well-known international NGOs that have been offering loans targeted to women since the fall of the Taliban regime. We relied on the help of their staff to contact a number of multiple borrowers from two low-income neighborhoods in Kabul.

The women are not representative of Afghan society, nor of its urban population. The sample is too small to yield findings that can be generalized to the rest of the population. Also, the women come from a particular socioeconomic background and ethnic group: they are ethnic Hazara women from lower-middle and working-class households.

Hazaras comprise 10 percent of the Afghan population. Unlike the majority Pashtuns, who are Pashto-speaking Sunnis, the Hazaras speak Dari (a Persian dialect), and the vast majority are Shi’as. The community is considered to have somewhat less repressive gender relations than other ethnic groups – partly because of the greater mobility of their women; but as Shawna Wakefield (2004) warns, this may be related to economic need rather than liberal attitudes. The difficult mountainous terrain in which Hazaras live and their high levels of poverty require women to take on responsibilities outside the home. Unlike Sunnis, Hazara women never fully

adopted the full covering of the *burqa*, opting instead for the full-length open-faced *chador*/*namoz*.

The Hazaras have a long history of persecution in Afghanistan – most recently by the Taliban, during whose regime many fled to Iran and Pakistan for safety. This history is one of the reasons they have been favored by organizations working with poorer sections of society. Our interviews can therefore be seen as in-depth exploration of complex issues from the point of view of a small and purposively selected sample of women and their families drawn from a community that occupies the margins rather than the mainstream of Afghan society.

We conducted semi-structured interviews in two rounds during 2009.<sup>3</sup> We also conducted separate interviews with male family members in six cases. We are aware that narratives such as these reflect how women want to represent themselves to their interlocutors and their silences may be as significant as what they say. Nevertheless, we believe that the open-ended format of the interviews and the opportunity for an interactive dialogue with a sympathetic female listener who spoke their language provided women with the space to think aloud about their own lives and the lives of those around them as well as to reflect on larger questions relating to the society in which they lived.

## COMPLYING WITH PATRIARCHAL NORMS: THE FORCES OF CONTINUITY IN WOMEN'S LIVES

### **Rights, responsibilities, and the patriarchal contract**

The household livelihood strategies described by the women bear the imprint of the country's recent history and continuing economic instability. Many families were, and continue to be, divided across the region, having moved several times during the decades of conflict, both within the country and across its borders, mainly to Pakistan or Iran. Despite these upheavals, and the adjustments that families had been forced to make in the light of their changing circumstances, the descriptions of family life that emerged from the interviews conformed in many ways to the division of roles and responsibilities described in the literature on classic patriarchy.

The women in our study were between ages 18 and 50. Ten were currently married, one was unmarried, and one was a widow. All the ever-married women had children – between five and eight. Seven women were illiterate while the rest had either primary or secondary education (see online Supplementary Appendix for details).<sup>4</sup> Together with other women family members, these women bore primary responsibility for domestic chores, regardless of other demands on their time from income-generation activities or, in the case of adolescent girls, from education. All were engaged in some form of income generation. Two had formal employment, one ran her own hairdressing salon, and two worked in their own bakeries. The rest

worked intermittently within their homes making quilts, breaking almonds, doing home-based embroidery, carpet weaving, or making tassels for scarves, tailoring, and livestock rearing. While the demands of work and loan repayment required some women to move around in the public domain – to go to shops, bakeries, NGO offices – they stressed that their husbands always knew where they were and they were generally accompanied, even if it was only by one of their children.

Men exercised authority, made key decisions, and managed family finances. While men often did the shopping for the household, neither fathers nor sons participated in domestic work. Their economic activities were far more diverse than those of women and entailed greater geographical mobility. They included working for a bus company, running a taxi or cart, daily wage labor, renting out equipment, trading in salt and potatoes, tailoring shop, grocery shop and office jobs. Some of the men were unemployed. Most men were out of the house all day, coming home only in the evening to eat, watch TV and sleep. They had many more social interactions outside the family than women and also met regularly with other men from the extended family for Qur'an reading sessions and discussion of family matters.

The gender division of roles and responsibilities within the family was conceptualized by the women in our study in terms of an implicit patriarchal contract that spelled out mutual claims and obligations within the family. Men's primary responsibilities for providing for the family and protecting its honor provided the rationale for their position of authority within the family, including decision-making power over their wives and children and the right to discipline them – with the use of violence if necessary. Very few women used the language of rights until questioned about it, and most offered a relational understanding of rights: the rights of family members in relation to each other conferred by religion, rather than the rights of citizens as defined by the state. Most perceived these rights to be asymmetrical, some appeared to accept this asymmetry; but there were dissenting voices.

Farah, 24, gave an account of women's rights that equated it with husbands' authority: "Women's rights come from their husbands. If I want to buy something, I ask my husband."<sup>5</sup> Jamila, 48, offered a more mutually constituted view of rights, yet it still proceeded from the assumption of men's authority over wives and children:

Women have rights. They work hard at home, they raise their children. [...] That is why mothers have rights and children have to respect their mothers. [...] God gives these rights ... Men have rights. They work hard, they make money ... The man has rights over his wife and children. [...] his rights are whatever is required: good food, clothes washed, house clean, children educated, no fighting in the

house, taking care of guests, having his tea and food ready, making sure daughters are not around boys.

Pareesa, 38, who had her own hairdressing salon, was one of the few who questioned what she saw as the existing structure of rights: "A man's rights are clear. In their opinion, they are free, they can have ten wives, they can go anywhere. These are men's rights." She believed that while men's rights were sanctioned by religion, men had interpreted it to their own advantage: "If my husband marries another woman, what can I do? Islam has (given them these rights). [. . .] A man has to have two or three wives, at least." She contested the justice of a system that gave men such monopoly over rights, and imagined how things might have been otherwise: "Are women not also creatures of God? If only my husband would just say to me, 'OK, I don't mind what you are doing,' it would be like the world had been given to me."

The significance of the patriarchal contract in shaping women's sense of selfhood was evident in the equation many made between compliance with its terms and female virtue. Farah recalls:

I used to think about myself, but I am free from these thoughts now. I wash my husbands' clothes, I support him . . . I work in a way that my husband can never have any excuse to say, 'Why are you like this?'

She now believes she has made the transition to a virtuous married wife.

Layla, 35, who said she had never heard of rights and never left the house without her husband's permission, offered an even sharper contrast between the virtuous woman and those without fear:

I am a woman and I pray to God that He does not make me fearless . . . Those women who are fearless go to whore houses. [. . .] My husband is crippled but . . . I am scared of him. I always ask him whether I can go out or not.

Anticipation of their husband's expectations was the guiding principle for the behavior of these two women, but whereas one sought to preempt the possibility of a reprimand, the other's compliance was secured by fear. Layla's son confirmed that his father often beat both wife and sons.

This takes us to one of the most striking findings emerging from our interviews, one supported by the secondary literature: the high levels of physical violence that forms the backdrop to everyday life in the community.<sup>6</sup> Along with references to violent outbreaks between men in the community, there were reports of mothers-in-law beating daughters-in-law, brothers beating sisters, parents beating their children, and, most frequently of all, husbands beating their wives. Almost every woman had been beaten at

some stage during her marriage; some still were. Men's right to beat their wives appeared to be an accepted feature of the marital contract: husbands were justified in beating their wives if they ceased to behave like "virtuous women," acted selfishly, willfully disobeyed, or failed to produce a son. One woman had suffered prolonged violence for producing daughters. She finally opted for a solution to satisfy her husband's desire for a son, which was to dress – and treat – her 12-year-old daughter as a boy until she reached adolescence, a solution apparently not unheard of in the Afghan context (Nushin Arbabzadah 2011).

On the other hand, many women reported incidents of violence that they did not consider to be justified by some perceived failure or transgressions on their part. Instead, violence appeared to be bound up with the difficulties men were experiencing in carrying out their breadwinning roles because of disability, unemployment, or inadequate earnings. Naz, 45, attributed her husband's violence to his ill health: "He is sick, it is not his fault." Farah described her husband as a "nervous wreck' and 'moody' . . . sometimes he is so good, and sometimes he is so bad-tempered." She did not consider his violence to be justified: "I told him, 'I hope you die young.' If I had the power, I would want to beat him . . . Later he said 'Sorry,' and I said, 'It's OK, women are for beating.'" Questioned about whether she really believed that, she said no, but that it was necessary for women, as mothers, to be "higher" than men "even if they were oppressed."

Paraesa thought her husband had a right to beat her if she did something wrong, such as leave the house without his permission; but he appeared to make arbitrary use of violence. She said he was "bad-tempered . . . he doesn't make any concessions, he starts beating." Her husband also acknowledged his violent behavior, but was clearly uncomfortable about it: "Why should I lie? Yes, sometimes I had to beat her, but I would always apologize to her afterward." Yet, she was also ready to find excuses, like his failure to find a job: "Poor him: he is alone. He is not in a good financial situation. He brings issues from outside into our home."

Naghma, 29 and a mother of five, had the most violent husband in our sample. When her husband was asked how he dealt with conflict within the marriage, he responded: "Sometimes I deal with the problem by just smiling. Sometimes I deal with it by beating her hard. With women, sometimes the solution is just to beat them hard. Sometimes I buy her a gift." Her 11-year-old daughter sometimes tried to intervene when her mother was being beaten, but her sons – who were just 8 and 9 – could do nothing but cry.

Women interviewed knew that under Islamic law, they have no custodial rights to their children, so to leave a violent or abusive husband would mean losing them too. This was the reason Naghma did not leave, despite her parents' advice: "I am scared that he will . . . take my children from me . . . Sometimes I think I am very stupid: what is there for me to stay for in this house? But I love my family." Layla, too, put up with her husband's beatings

for the sake of her children: “We had a fight once and he told me to go if I wanted. I said: ‘I will never leave my children.’”

### **Rights, responsibilities, and the moral community**

If the unequal power dynamics of marriage and family life made it difficult for women to challenge perceived injustices, the pressure to accept their fate was reinforced by their social isolation. For all the closeness of their family relationships, many of the women in our study appeared lonely. The disruptions of the war had parted them from their families by migration and displacement. Few had family or friends nearby that they could turn to in times of trouble. Nor was there any question of going to formal authorities. Instead, they either went to their “white beards” (elder members of the family), to a religious authority or, as Farah put it, “just kept it inside themselves.” These options did little to encourage them to question the justice of the prevailing order.

Relationships with abusive or violent husbands constituted the main source of stress and depression in women’s lives. Pareesa, whose own family had remained in Iran, recalled the early years after her return to Kabul when her husband had no work and took out his frustrations on her. She had, on one occasion, turned to her husband’s parents for help, but their response had been: “You have to tolerate it.”

Women also turned to their faith in times of trouble or need, but they exhibited a remarkably unanimous mistrust of mullahs (clerics). Safa, 27, had gone to a mullah when her first husband died, leaving her to care for two young children. She wanted his help to secure her husband’s property for her children. His response that the property should go the children’s uncle infuriated her: “I told him, ‘You don’t understand anything.’ I was very angry and said ‘You don’t work well.’” Most women were scathing in their comments. Saeeda, 50, said, “I don’t go to the mullah. I don’t believe in him, I don’t like him. I think he lies. He is not from God . . . they say they are pure, but they are not as pure as they say.” They believed that the mullahs were often hypocrites and charlatans, more interested in preserving the status quo than offering support to those in need.

A far more common source of peace and solace among our respondents were favored local shrines. Pilgrimages to such shrines are a long-standing custom in the Hazara community, but had been banned by the Taliban who believed that reverence of mystic saints was against the tenets of Islam. Women viewed the mosque as the house of God, a place for formal prayers on holy days; and the shrine as a place of relaxed spirituality and sociability, where they went when there was a problem in the family, when their husbands beat them, when they needed comfort or – as in the case of Hafeeza – simply when they had time on their hands: “I don’t have anyone here, my sister is in Iran. Women do not have anywhere to go; there is no one in the

mosque they can talk to.” For Layla too, the shrine offered both peace and sociability: “I don’t need anyone but God. In the shrines, there are needy people, you can cook food and distribute it to them.”

### CONTESTING PATRIARCHAL NORMS: FORCES FOR CHANGE IN WOMEN’S LIVES

Powerful forces contribute to the resilience of patriarchal structures in Afghanistan and place serious constraints on women’s capacity to question, let alone, challenge the justice of the social arrangements governing their lives. At the same time, both explicit statements to this effect as well as the contradictions and slippages evident in some of their accounts suggest that not all the women in our small sample were equally resigned to the subordinate status assigned to them by these arrangements. The major upheavals of the past decades, as well as current efforts to bring about change, had contributed to varying degrees of dissent on their part. Long-established ways of organizing gender relations could be critically reevaluated because these women, as well as the men in their family, had been exposed to alternative ways of organizing these relations. What may have once been taken for granted as the natural or divinely ordained social order by women who have been described as among the most excluded in an increasingly integrated world (Moghadam 2002) was becoming “de-naturalized” through the competing discourses of justice and morality to which ordinary men and women had access. The fact that men’s privileged status as family breadwinner had been eroded by a war-torn economy placed further strains on the social order.

#### **“Life was better in Iran”: The view from elsewhere**

One major source of change was the large-scale displacement of the population as a result of the war and the associated urbanization of what had been a largely rural population. Six million Afghans, Hazaras among them, had fled to live in Iran or to the refugee camps of Pakistan. They did not return to their villages after the Taliban fell, but made their way to Kabul to seek a living in the urban economy.

Seven women in our study had lived in Iran, which had given them a reflexive distance from which to evaluate their own society. The view that “life was better in Iran” was a refrain that ran through many of their narratives.<sup>7</sup> Their reasons had little to do with religion per se: rather, they appeared to reflect the value that women attached to being part of a functioning state. For many, this was their first experience of life in or near a city, of access to water, roads, markets, jobs, health services, and schools. Iran offered greater security of life, livelihoods, and standard of living and also better education and mobility for women. It was viewed as a society that

respected and delivered on women's rights, where police could be relied on for protection.

Naghma's most vivid memory was of the time she went to the local police station to report her husband's violence. At police insistence, her husband apologized to her and left her in peace for two months before resuming his beatings. She had also gone to a marriage counselor in Iran after seeing a program on local TV recommending counseling to help determine whether the marriage was worth saving. In Kabul, there were no marriage counselors, and it was unlikely that complaints to the police would have any effect.

Pareesa held Iran up as a model for Afghanistan because it allowed women greater freedom of movement outside the home: "If women stay at home, the country will regress. [...] Iranians look down on Afghans, but they respect the Japanese and Koreans because both women and men try to make their country." She felt that men also had been changed by their exposure to different realities: "Men can no longer put pressure. Some men have seen the world. [...] People have sought refuge in other countries and have changed. When you meet different people, you realize things."

Safa also felt her time in Iran had changed her: "When we went to Iran, I didn't want to come back. When I went there, I started to know the world." She had been exposed to a different and gentler set of values. Once, she was beating her child in a park and had been stopped by a group of students. Even her mother, who had also been living in Iran for some time, had said: "The time for beating children with an electric cable is long past – you should advise them instead." Safa was hopeful that it was only a matter of time before things improved in Afghanistan: "In ten years, Afghanistan will be like Iran and women will have freedom and security."

### **Freedom after the Taliban: The view from the present**

The fall of the Taliban marked an important watershed in the lives of the Hazara community because they had been singled out for some of its harshest treatment. Not only were many of the restrictions imposed by regime now removed, but there were active efforts on the part of the international community to construct a modern democratic state. The women in our study were well-disposed toward the Karzai regime because they considered him to be well-disposed toward their community. They also associated it with visible evidence of progress: the availability of gas and electricity, the asphaltting of roads, the increase in economic activity, improved access to the media, particularly television, and the proliferation of development NGOs.

These changes meant that they were able to look back on the past from the vantage point of a very different present. Parwana, 37, recalled how women often stumbled and fell when they went outside during the days of Taliban rule because they were not accustomed to wearing the all-encompassing

burqa imposed by their regime. However, the most lasting memory of that period was that of fear. As Safa put it, “We were all scared then. When I went out somewhere, I would come back quickly so that they could not hurt me.” As Jamila told us, they were frightened to leave their homes, to visit others, to go to work, or even to visit shrines, since all these were now forbidden.

If the recurring theme in women’s narratives about the Taliban era was that of fear, the recurring theme that summarized the present was “freedom.” As Jamila stated:

Since the Taliban left, we have been free. Now, we wear the chador namoz. We can go out freely. We can go shopping. My daughters can go to school. Men can go and work in peace. [...] Now I see on TV that girls go to karate class. Freedom is good; anyone can go out with honor.

She was referring to the ordinary freedoms that men and women in much of the world, including Iran and Pakistan, take for granted but which had been denied to them for so many years.

Women’s ability to earn was a cherished freedom. Nadia’s mother recalled life under the Taliban: “[Women] were relying on men to bring money home, only men could work,” she said, whereas, “Now you eat from what you earn . . . there are jobs for women, you can work in agriculture, in organizations.” Nadia, 18, agreed: “Both men and women can work now, people can walk freely, they can be teachers. Women could not be teachers before.”

### COMPETING DISCOURSES ON RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Along with the restoration of earlier freedoms, the fall of the Taliban had seen a renewed focus on governance structures as part of the post-war reconstruction. An important aspect of this was the emergence of a formal legalistic discourse of gender equality and alternative jurisdictions to those of kinship and community. The women in our study had become aware of these changes through their social interactions as well as through the media. While the news and soap operas shown on TV exposed these women to other worlds and ways of living, it was also the medium through which they learnt about competing discourses about rights and responsibilities.

There were the conservative discourses rooted in the moral economy of kinship, community and faith and actively disseminated by religious figures. One of these was an Iranian-backed cleric called Mohsini who had his own television channel. At the time of the study, he was proposing to reform Shi’a personal law purportedly to enhance the security of marriage by clearly spelling out the mutual responsibilities of both partners to each other. These

included the husband's responsibility to provide for his wife and have sexual relations with her at least once every four days and the wife's to submit to her husband's "reasonable sexual enjoyment" and obtain his permission to go out of the house (Articles 132, 133, and 77). Underpinning these various provisions was the overarching responsibility of wives to be obedient to their husbands.

The law, characterized as "legalizing rape in marriage" (Lynne L. Mangano and Amy L. Poland 2012), generated a great deal of controversy nationally and internationally, including a public demonstration by mainly Shi'a women. However, it was welcomed by a number of our respondents on grounds that reflected their own priorities and (mis)interpretations of the law. Saeeda believed that it worked in women's favor. She particularly supported women's rights to be provided for by their husbands and not to be required to work.

Farah's support seemed designed to reinforce her views about women's virtue, and she expressed surprise that women had demonstrated against it: "How is it possible that a woman goes out without her husband's permission?" Yet further discussion revealed that she had a somewhat selective interpretation of the law. Asked how she would react if she herself needed to go out – for instance, to buy salt – and her husband forbade it, she responded, "I would pick a fight. He can't tell me this." Wafa, 45, shared this selective view about restrictions on women's mobility outside the home, believing that it applied only to those "bad women who go out from morning till night to have fun. Their husbands must not allow this. Those women that, God forbid, do bad things."

Pareesa's husband, by contrast, was clear in his opposition to the proposed law:

Mohsini is misusing the Shi'a people, he is agitating them. The issue will get worse. Islam says that women should not leave the house, but if there is friendship between men and women, there is no problem. There are some people who lock their wives inside the house, but this is not good for them even from Islam's point of view.

Alongside these religious discourses, we noted the growing emergence of a new legal discourse about gender equality and a formal justice system, actively promoted by the international donor community through an aid-dependent government. Though most had heard of the AIHRC, none had been to it or knew of anyone who had. Nevertheless, many welcomed the growth of a formal justice system that offered to rectify some of the community-based arbitration.

This was nicely illustrated by Safa's view that the new jurisdiction would hold men to account for their arbitrary use of power:

Men were not scared before, but now they are. I tell my husband: “If you beat me, I will report you.” [...] Now women are being paid attention to, husbands care about their wives. Violence against women had come down because people were scared to go to jail. I watch it on TV. You can see if women are oppressed, men are punished.

Naghma, whose husband had become increasingly abusive over time, questioned the justice of a moral code that allowed husbands to behave without any regard for their wives’ feelings:

When [a wife] works hard at home, there should be kindness towards her. If I am beaten, my heart is broken. My right is that I should be able to ask my husband, “Why am I guilty?” I pray to God that he can tell me what has happened. Why don’t I have the right to choose my own clothes or to go to my parents’ house? A woman is not an animal.

She, too, welcomed forms of change that promised to address these injustices. She regarded the ability to vote to be the most important change in women’s lives. She knew that the law gave women more rights than before and that there was a Commission that they could go to with their complaints. She believed that the women’s organizations now active in the country had been a major force in modifying men’s ability to restrict women’s freedoms (although she added that “too much freedom is not good, either”). She cited the example of her sister, who had learned about her rights from the TV and had been able to stand up to an oppressive mother-in-law by threatening to complain to a women’s rights organization.

Pareesa spoke of the price that women had paid in the past for any expression of dissent:

A woman did not have any rights. She did not have any courage. Even if she was likely to be killed, she did not have the right to complain . . . if a woman brought up the subject of divorce, she would be killed.

She resented the way that religion was used to uphold men’s monopoly of rights. She believed there had to be some form of restraint to make men more accountable for their actions: “There has to be a force on men. If there isn’t, awful things happen to women.” In her view, the setting-up of the AIHRC and a police force that was willing to intervene on behalf of women was a move in this direction.

## EXPANSION OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

The targeting of microfinance to women is a relatively new phenomenon in Afghanistan. Its significance derives from the fact that this is a context

where women's economic dependence is seen as a central factor in their subordination. We found that it was generally men who urged their wives to take advantage of a loan, an indication of the economic pressures they were under. The loans were used to set men up in income-generating activities – a taxi business, small trade, raising poultry or livestock, purchase of carpet-weaving loom, setting up a shop, or financing training to prepare sons for the labor market. Only a few women had used the loan to finance an independent economic activity for themselves: two ran bakeries and one had a hairdressing business.

Women's experiences with the loans depended very much on how they were used. The unproductive use of loans led to greater indebtedness and intensified stress. For instance, Layla's first loan was used to release her brother-in-law from prison. They had tried unsuccessfully to save enough from her husband's earnings to repay the loan and were now trying to juggle three different loans from three different organizations. Layla's husband's abuse had increased as a result of the stress he was going through, leading her to conclude that "the loans have ruined our life."

For Saeeda, access to microfinance had contributed to the economic welfare of the household; but little more. She had used her loan to clear her husband's debt and buy a battery for his taxi. "My husband's problems are solved, so my problems are solved." Parwana already worked full time as a security guard for a local business. While her husband invested her loans in building up a poultry and livestock business, thereby diversifying the household livelihood base, she gained far greater satisfaction from her own full-time job.

Other women reported a variety of less tangible impacts beyond immediate livelihood considerations. Their positive evaluations draw attention to aspects of their lives and relationships in which they had welcomed the possibility for change. These related to their financial reliance on husbands, lack of any independent purchasing power, violent marriages, lack of voice within the household, social invisibility, and sense of isolation.

Hafiza, 35, noted one of the first changes that took place after she set up her own bakery was a decline in her husband's violence. Initially, it was because she threatened not to go to work if he beat her; then she sensed he had a developed newfound respect for her earning capacity, perhaps also because he had "been around and seen things . . . he has seen people, he has seen that people work." She also felt that she had gained the respect of her neighbors: "I hear people say, 'This man's wife is capable. If she was not there, this man would not be able to make a living.'" She herself had grown in self-confidence, and gained knowledge about the world and how to negotiate her way in it.

While Jamila's own economic activities had not changed a great deal with the loans, she used them to set up her two sons in business and help members of their extended family. She believed this improved her relations

with her husband and raised her status in the wider community and at home. Her daughter agreed: “My father respects my mother a lot and always tells her to sit here (pointing to the cushions), not there (pointing to the floor).”

Pareesa not only valued the measure of independence her earnings from her hairdressing business gave her, but felt that it had eased some of the pressures that had led her husband’s earlier violence. “I can pay for my own expenses now, so the violence has reduced. I feel proud, I am not dependent . . . I feel like I am a man.” Her husband, too, acknowledged a change in himself. Pareesa says he now tells neighbors to treat their wives with more respect.

We noted earlier the isolation that many women felt within their marriages and communities. The expansion of their social interactions was another aspect of their access to microfinance that they greatly valued. Nadia spoke of her enjoyment in visiting the WfW office, “An office full of women, all with different stories.” It represented her doorway to the outside world: “I go out and talk to my sisters. I see different people.” And her visits to the market brought her into contact with new ideas: “When I go to market, I have heard that now men and women are equal.”

Hafiza, too, spoke of the socializing, “I become familiar with other people. The office is full. People talk, you have to talk back.” Until Naghma’s husband forbade her to visit the WfW office, she had found it to be a place where she could share her problems with other women:

Sometimes when I went there I had a black eye or some injury, they would get very angry . . . I like hanging about with them – you can confide in them and talk to them. [...] I heard strange things about family life. They share their problems.<sup>8</sup>

#### INTERPRETING THE NARRATIVES: RENEGOTIATING PATRIARCHAL CONTRACTS IN A PERIOD OF TRANSITION

It seems clear from these narratives that the women in our study conceptualized gender relations within the family in terms of an implicit patriarchal contract that spelled out the mutual claims and obligations of family members. A virtuous woman was defined by her willingness to comply with the terms of this contract; in return, she could expect to be provided for, protected in times of crisis, and represented in the public domain.

Their lived realities departed, often dramatically, from this idealized version. As a result, their narratives appeared to be dominated by their efforts to live up to their obligations as mothers and wives in a society in which male family members were finding it hard to live up to theirs – frequently, and often violently, venting their frustrations on their wives and children. These struggles to manage the disjuncture between the normative model of gender

relations and its concrete manifestations in their daily lives took place in a context in which the customs and beliefs of the past were being acted on by larger forces for change.

We noted the variety of pressures on women to accept their subordinate status and to put up with their situation, regardless of how they felt: the weight of tradition; the internalization of their place in society; the fear of losing their children, of being sent back in shame to the parental home, of being expelled from the family; combined with power, often backed by physical violence, of dominant members of the family and the wider community to reinforce the status quo.

Men, too, were finding the burden of responsibility associated with their position in the household difficult to deal with in the aftermath of decades of upheaval. While women recognized this, they also saw many aspects of their husbands' unjust behavior toward them as manifestations of a more generalized pattern of injustice that allowed men to abuse their power over women. Parwana echoed the sentiments of others in our study who did not hold "Afghan values" in high regard: "Regardless of whatever progress Afghanistan makes, its people will still be backward. They have traditional ideas, like women are the slaves of the house. Regardless of the changes in the environment, men's way of thinking doesn't change." Nagma's sense of injustice was based on an assertion of women's humanity that resonated with universal claims for recognition: "Women are not animals."

Such views cannot be dismissed as the uncritical adoption of a Western feminist prism. Our respondents did not have to turn their backs on their society's codes about rights and responsibilities in order to feel a keen sense of injustice that men's violations of these codes went unnoticed and unpunished. Nor did they have to subscribe to the language of rights in order to have strong ideas about what was *right* and *fair*.

Their ability to take a critical stance toward their own society and to question the justice of its arrangements appeared to stem from massive changes and displacements that they had lived through in recent years. Their years in Iran had given some of these women the standpoint of "observer" from which to evaluate a society in which they were also "participants" (Seyla Benhabib 1992). For others, the experience of life, first under the mujahidin and then the Taliban, helped to crystallize the importance of some of the freedoms they had once enjoyed. The fall of the Taliban had not only restored some of these freedoms, but was accompanied by the growth of a new legalistic discourse around gender equality and women's rights. Both women and men learnt about this discourse from their TVs, their forays into the public domain, and their interactions with each other. TV, in particular, has become an important vehicle for conveying competing discourses about women's place in Afghan society, including religious channels, education programs about women's rights, as well as soap operas that opened a window onto how women lived in other societies.

In the context of these upheavals, microfinance did not appear to have a dramatic impact on women's lives – but it is important not to overlook the significance of the changes that it did bring about for some: an income of their own, a voice in household affairs, and access to social relationships beyond those “given” by family and kinship. It also seemed to have triggered changes in the behavior of men in some of their families, although a number of women believed that men had also been changed by their own tumultuous experiences in recent decades.

Where we do not see evidence of change is in women's willingness or ability to exercise greater collective voice in the wider community. All of the women had voted and were eager to discuss the reasons for their vote, but none of them spoke of the desire to take up other forms of political activity to protest gender injustices. This may have to wait for the next generation. Many of the mothers were using the meager resources at their disposal to invest in a better future for their daughters, carving out what we might call an *intergenerational pathway of empowerment*. Pareesa was the most optimistic that this was the right thing to do:

Before, boys and girls were forced to marry each other. [. . .] Now, they have become friends with each other; and then they marry, so love and kindness is built between them – that makes violence less. [. . .] The more people study, the better it gets. My daughters are the builders of the future. Where there is education, there is progress.

#### CONCLUSION: CULTURAL VALUES OR WOMEN'S RIGHTS?

Reading across these individual narratives, we discern a range of views about how the women in our study viewed their place within Afghan society and how they evaluated the forces of change in their lives. The idea of the patriarchal contract that underpinned the gender relations within their families can be seen as a metaphor for a larger society in which social relations are organized around mutual responsibilities rather than individual rights. Afghan norms and values play a significant role in giving substance to these claims and obligations and providing the idiom in which they are expressed and justified.

But many of the women in our study did not enjoy the respect and authority within the domestic sphere that some authors have claimed was their cultural due. Their contributions to the household economy went unrecognized until they took on a monetized form. Male privilege remained largely intact, even when men failed to discharge their responsibilities; and violence was used on a routine basis – most often by husbands against wives, but also by dominant members over subordinate ones.

Women's varying responses to this exercise of power without any apparent accountability within family or the wider moral community reflect a number

of different positions in larger debates about these issues. Some hoped for reforms from within, such as Mohsini's proposal for Shi'a personal law reform. They sought firmer assurance that men would honor their obligations and provide the protections that went with women's dependent status. They came closest to the "other" path to personhood sketched out by Abu-Lughod, seeking fulfillment within the normative framework of the patriarchal contract.

Others welcomed the evolving legal apparatus as a *complement* to the traditional structures of authority within the community in holding men to account. They saw that religion had given men monopoly over rights, but had done little to enforce the responsibilities on which these rights rested. The greater attention to women's rights within the constitution, laws, and AIHRC appeared to address a major lacuna within the customary framework of rights and responsibilities.

Finally, a third – the smallest – group spoke out forcefully against the injustices that men as individuals were able to perpetrate on the basis of the privileges enjoyed by men as a group. They welcomed the possibility of changes that would allow for relationships based on mutual love and respect rather than fear and violence. While their narratives did not quite conform to the universalist discourse of emancipation, equality, and rights that Abu-Lughod spoke of, they did accommodate a more egalitarian model of gender relations in which women's desire to get a job, to educate themselves and their daughters, to have a say in who they married, and not to be beaten for expressing or acting on these desires would not be seen as an unacceptable threat to Afghan norms or Islamic values.

While the women in our study were from the minority Hazara community, there are reasons to believe that they are not exceptional or idiosyncratic in their views. A nationally representative sample of over 6,000 adults carried out in 2009 across regions and ethnic groups found that women were somewhat less likely than men to express confidence in the informal justice system, where verdicts tended to uphold the patriarchal order, and significantly more likely to express confidence about the formal justice system (Manganaro and Poland 2012). Ethnic minority groups, including the Hazaras, were less likely to express confidence in informal systems and more likely to express support of formal systems than the majority Pashtuns.

The women in our study did not experience "Afghan culture" as a static and internally coherent system that lay outside the realm of contestation, but as the lived relationships of everyday life that had to be negotiated on a daily basis from highly unequal positions. The various upheavals that have characterized Afghan history in recent decades and the efforts of successive regimes to impose their own, often conflicting, models of gender relations on the Afghan population provide the backdrop against which these negotiations are being carried out. The narratives that inform our analysis can therefore be read as the views of a small section of Afghan

society who are participating in a prolonged societal transition from “doxa” – a single dominant interpretation of culture – to “discourse,” where various competing interpretations become possible (Pierre Bourdieu 1977). What is noteworthy is that even within this small group, evaluations of Afghan culture vary widely. These women are thus likely to represent in microcosm what is happening elsewhere in their society: a growing diversity of views about the kind of society they want as both men and women become aware of diverse ways of organizing social life.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Ahmed-Ghosh (2006) and Barakat and Wardell (2002).
- <sup>2</sup> The Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Partners' Consortium was funded by the Department for International Development, UK. The funding for this project was provided by NORAD, Norway.
- <sup>3</sup> Our field researchers were Sogol Zand and Naysan Adlparvar.
- <sup>4</sup> The online Supplementary Appendix is available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2014.926558>.
- <sup>5</sup> We confirm that the persons identified in this contribution have given permission for personal information to be published in *Feminist Economics*.
- <sup>6</sup> Violence against women – physical, sexual, and psychological – is one of the main security problems for women in Afghanistan, to the extent of being considered “natural” in Afghan homes (DFID 2008).
- <sup>7</sup> This is also noted by Abu-Lughod (2002).
- <sup>8</sup> It is interesting that these comments were not made in relation to the BRAC office, possibly because it had a more male-dominated culture.

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