Rural Women in the Balkh and Herat Provinces of Afghanistan

Simultaneous Resistance to, and Reproduction of, Patriarchal Power Structures

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Abstract

This article will examine how rural Afghan women employ practices of everyday resistance as a means of challenging extremely patriarchal power structures and male domination in Afghanistan. The research presented illustrates how rural women simultaneously support and reproduce patriarchal societal structures and values through quiet encroachment of public spaces and the labour market as well as conscious adherence to certain patriarchal norms.

Through a qualitative research method consisting of eleven focus groups with 130 rural women from four districts, across two provinces in Afghanistan, a structurationist approach is employed in order to fully account for the interaction and interrelationship between dominant, male-privileging structures of power and rural women's agency. Significantly, these women, through the intentions behind their practices of everyday resistance and encroachment upon public spaces, demonstrate that they do not wish to eradicate patriarchy, but rather to transform it into a more benign structure of power which conforms to the women's interpretation of Islam. This is a construction of Islam which accommodates women as individuals with agency and ability, enabling them to take advantage of independent mobility, provide for their families, and send their children (sons and daughters) to school.

Thus, these women deliberately engage in everyday resistance to extreme manifestations of patriarchy, but simultaneously consciously adhere to, and subtly advocate for, more benevolent patriarchal social norms.

Introduction

This article draws on qualitative data generated through eleven focus groups conducted with 130 rural Afghan women, in order to examine the perceptions, objectives and behaviours of these women as they seek to define and obtain their rights in a way which is congruent with their construction of Islam. Though their primary objective is not to abolish or undermine patriarchal power structures, the rural women who participated in this research do employ practices of everyday resistance as a means of challenging extremely patriarchal manifestations of domination and power, particularly when such behaviour contradicts their conception of Islam, or prevents women from enjoying their rights as outlined within the Quran. The resulting behavioural dynamic among rural women is a complex web of sometimes contradictory motivations, values, and obligations expressed as everyday resistance to extreme patriarchy,[1] but simultaneous support for, and perpetuation of, patriarchal societal structures and values through quiet encroachment of public spaces and the labour market.

After a brief overview of research strategy and methodology, James Scott's theory of everyday resistance[2] will be examined in terms of its analysis of resistance and power, as a means of illustrating the resonance of this theoretical framework for the socio-political situation of rural Afghan women. The integral nature of intention within the theory of everyday resistance provides the opportunity to reflect upon the experiences and motivations of rural Afghan women, particularly in the transition from the

[1] Throughout this article, 'extreme patriarchy' will be used in reference to the prevailing androcentric power dynamics that govern rural Afghanistan through reliance upon a socially constructed gender hierarchy, and which are characterized by: exclusion of women from all decision-making processes; normative expectation that women will adhere to the decisions and desires of men without challenge; sanctioning of violence against women for any perceived transgressions of these expectations; confinement of women to the home and other restrictions on her freedom of movement imposed by men; a socially constructed belief that women are lacking in ability and potential to perform roles external to the domestic sphere, and the positioning of women as bearers of family honour.

[2] See Scott J, (1985), Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance, Yale University Press; and Scott J, (1990), Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts, Yale University Press.

private to the public spheres as arenas for resistance. The lack of intention to resist in the public arena necessitates an exploration of Asef Bayat's theory of the quiet encroachment of "non-movements",[3] which will be explored in comparison to both the everyday resistance framework and the rural Afghan context, in order to distinguish between the two theories and clarify when their mutually exclusive spheres best apply.

Both Scott and Bayat's analytical frameworks will be positioned within, and interrogated by, post-colonial feminist writings on Muslim women and Muslim women's resistance by Lila Abu-Lughod,[4] Saba Mahmood[5] and Anila Daulatzai,[6] as they point to the necessity of shedding the western-imperialist gaze and being open to the values and experiences of Muslim women as they articulate them themselves.

Moving on from the background literature, parameters of resistance will be identified as a means of better understanding both the institutions of repression and the intentions behind the acts of resistance, with a duality being presented to exemplify how the structural and the personal interact to form parameters of resistance through an omnipresent threat of violent retribution for dissent, combined with a conscious effort to conform to the behavioural standards these women set for themselves in accordance with their patriarchal interpretation of Islam. Women simultaneously resist what they perceive to be un-Islamic behaviour sanctioned by extreme patriarchy, whilst making a conscious decision to conform to patriarchal religious and social standards. Despite this conscious effort to adhere to certain patriarchal standards while resisting others, data will be presented that shows how in engaging in hidden transcripts the women are consciously resisting individual males within their families, but also unconsciously resisting societal and

[3] See Bayat A, (2013), Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East (2nd ed), Stanford University Press.

[4] (2002), Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others, *American Anthropologist,* 104 (3), pp783 – 790.

[5] (2005), The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, Princeton University Press; and (2006), Feminist Theory, Agency and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt, *The Finnish Society for the Study of Religion: Temenos,* 42 (1), pp31 – 71.

[6] (2008), The Discursive Occupation of Afghanistan, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* 35 (3), pp419 – 435.

patriarchal norms which dictate that what happens in the home should stay in the home.

Following a discussion on the evident parameters of resistance, this article analyses forms of everyday resistance that rural Afghan women deploy against immediate manifestations of male power sanctioned by extreme patriarchy in the private sphere. Types of resistance identifiable throughout this research are:

- False deference;
- Calculated Compliance;
- Deliberate maintenance of a calm veneer in the face of hostility;
- Subversive forms of childrearing;
- Hidden transcripts, such as: grumbling and moaning, making jokes and derogatory comments about husbands and other males in positions of power.

After examining the private sphere, represented by the home and women-only spaces as an arena of resistance, the site of rural women's agency will be relocated to the public sphere, with a corresponding shift in intention for the research participants. In analysing rural women's non-movement for increasing acceptance of their access to public space as a means through which to generate an income, this section will investigate how, once having gained permission to utilize the public arena, rural women view their battle as won, and will switch to supporting and reproducing patriarchal structures of community governance provided they are benign. Though the women do not intend their encroachment upon public space to be an act of resistance, their actions are nevertheless resulting in unplanned structural change, as social norms are shifting and communities are becoming more accommodating towards women, driven initially by poverty maybe, but then becoming more overtly supportive.

Research Strategy

This research examines the conditions and constraints that existing dominant patriarchal power structures place on the Afghan women who seek to challenge them, but who also maintain and reproduce these patriarchal structures through their ingrained behaviours and expressions of agency. This relationship between power and subject, rather than being static, is fluid and dynamic, being continually pushed, transformed, remoulded and reinforced

by both sides. The structurationist ontological stance of Anthony Giddens[7] is therefore employed, as it permits approaching this research through the dual lenses of structure and agency as intimately interrelated, and thus of equal importance in the dynamic relationship between patriarchy, resistance, conformity and reproduction.

Gidden's approach and its move away from a purely structural or agency-based theory, also permits a departure from the traditional androcentric nature of resistance studies. Robin Thomas and Annette Davies explain that in moving away from strictly Marxist theories of resistance, we create room for 'a more adequate theorizing of the self, to appreciate the complexities and nuances of resistance at the level of the individual, and different motivations of individuals to resist'.[8] In researching modes of resistance deployed by rural Afghan women to extreme patriarchy in its many manifestations, this flexibility of recognition and theorizing is essential. Furthermore, Giddens' epistemological framework is particularly adept at combining the theoretical with the empirical, which is particularly relevant for the field of gender; as Heike Kahlert points out, studies performed by scholars of women's or gender studies are often exclusively action-based or structural, and thus 'not able to analyse the simultaneity of stability and change in social practices […] they investigate only "subjective" aspects or "objective" conditions.'[9] The constant and simultaneous challenging of, conforming to, and compromising with extreme patriarchal power performed by rural Afghan women demands a structurationist approach, in order to accommodate the interrelated and fluid nature of power structure and agency.

Methodology

Qualitative data was generated through focus groups in which standardized questions were asked, with the responses being used as a platform for ad hoc further questions seeking to elicit elaboration. The problematic security

[7] See Giddens A, (1984), The Constitution of Society, University of California Press.

[8] (2005), What Have the Feminists Done for Us? Feminist Theory and Organizational Resistance, *Organization,*
12 (5), p712.

[9] Kahlert H, (2012), The Simultaneity of Stability and Change in Gender Relations – Contributions from Giddens' Structuration Theory, *Studia Humanistyczne,* 11(2), p57-60.

situation in Afghanistan meant that Injil and Herat districts (in Herat Province), and Balkh and Mazar-i-Sharif districts (in Balkh province), were the only geographic locations secure enough to conduct research in rural areas. However, the insecure nature of these areas meant that spending more than a few hours in each women-only space was impossible. For this reason, focus groups were the only method of inter-personal data generation I was able to employ. Despite the fact that reliance on focus groups without semi-structured interviews with individuals to supplement them is far from the ideal research scenario, focus group participants nevertheless provided a wealth and depth of conversation that surprised me, as did their openness in talking about very private matters. A total of 130 rural women between the ages of eighteen to sixty years old participated in eleven focus groups, which were conducted throughout the four districts mentioned above.

Access to rural women, who in extremely conservative communities often live the majority of their lives behind closed doors, was secured through a foreign development organization. This NGO kindly facilitated my research by providing me with access to rural women beneficiaries of their economic empowerment programmes, whilst simultaneously permitting me to take advantage of their security apparatus. It is important to note therefore, that the participant sample is not necessarily representative of rural Afghan women, either as a generic group or within the districts that we conducted focus groups, due to the very fact that they were participating in vocational-training programmes and had therefore secured permission to leave their homes. As the focus group participants illustrated however, it was usually the men in their families rather than the women themselves who decided whether or not they could leave the home in order to participate in vocational training provided by the NGO, so at least a certain degree of reflectivity of other rural women likely does exist. Until relatively recently, when research participants had begun vocational training, the majority had spent their entire lives confined to their homes; the exception being women from farming communities, who often worked the fields alongside the men, but whose movement was still policed at a community level.

In addition, while reliance on NGO beneficiaries as research participants was necessary due to them being the only rural women we could access without compromising the safety of the participants, translators or myself, this sampling method inherently poses the danger of bias in so much as the participants may have been telling us what they thought we wanted to hear, or what they may have thought would secure increased services or

resources in the future. The only means of mitigating this was to provide a clear explanation of the research, combined with an explanation of how it is completely independent of the NGO prior to focus groups commencing. Within the groups of women I had access to, I employed a system of stratified sampling in terms of age (eighteen to sixty years old), background (married, widow, unmarried), and ethnicity as far as possible, to ensure a breadth of experience and perspective during focus group discussions.

Translators were sourced from the foreign NGO, and were both fluent in Pashto and English, with one also being fluent in Dari. Pashto and Dari are the national languages of Afghanistan, and all research participants were comfortable communicating in these languages. Both translators were briefed on the nature of the research, but also on interview skills and research ethics before focus groups were conducted. Importantly, the rural women participating in this research did not know either translator, and prior to each focus group commencing, they were reassured of the fact that the translator present was from Kabul rather than their community. Research participants were assured they would remain anonymous, with no names of participants or villages being recorded. Furthermore, regional staff, and NGO staff the research participants regularly interacted with, were asked to leave the room while focus groups were taking place, in order to ensure confidentiality within the community. This measure also contributed towards participants feeling comfortable enough to express themselves freely. Focus groups were all conducted in women-only spaces.

Before each focus group was conducted, myself and the translator present took the time to explain who I was, who the translator was, and the purpose of the focus group discussion along with details regarding anonymity. Moreover, it was made explicit that participation in this research was voluntary, with the women being reassured that there would be no negative reprisals if they chose not to take part. It was also made clear that if the women did not feel comfortable answering a question, they did not have to engage, and we could just move on to the next question instead. Finally, my dictaphone was also introduced to the group, with the women being asked for permission for me to use it. Several women were concerned that it would film them, but upon having it explained that the dictaphone would record their voice only, all participants stated that they were happy for it to be used. This was a positive outcome, enabling me to more actively participate in discussions, while also allowing for more time to transcribe recordings back in Kabul.

After leaving Afghanistan I was able to embark upon data analysis. This analysis was conducted by coding the transcripts according to key concepts within questions and corresponding key phrases within the responses of the women. These codes were then entered into a spreadsheet accordingly, which enabled me to identify patterns within the data as well as any anomalies.

Empirical Context

The American invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent removal of Taliban from official governance took place in 2001. However, despite the official overthrow of the Taliban, extreme male domination (both elite and local) of the lives of rural Afghan women continues.[10] Additionally, eighteen years after the U.S invasion, in many areas of Afghanistan poverty levels remain extremely high, physical violence against women is widespread, and harmful cultural practices towards women persist, combining to make the country the world's second most dangerous for women.[11]

The barriers rural Afghan women currently face in fulfilling their potential are multifaceted. Decades of conflict have torn the country and the economy apart, fracturing social cohesion and increasing the vulnerability of women. It is estimated that seventy per cent of Afghans require psychological support[12] as a result of ongoing conflict and extreme poverty, and many women in rural areas are still prevented from accessing education or other public services. However, women are primary carers for entire families, and

[10] See Barr H, (May 30th 2018), 'Afghan Government Ignoring Violence Against Women', Human Rights Watch: Dispatches online; Barr H, (11th December 2013), In Afghanistan, Women Betrayed, *International New York Times;* Safi S, (July 1st 2018), Why Female Suicide in Afghanistan is so Prevalent, *BBC News* online; and UN Women, (December 2013), "Like a Bird with Broken Wings": Afghan Women Oral History 1978 – 2008, *UN Women Afghanistan Country Office*.

[11] (2018), 'The World's Most Dangerous Countries for Women', *Thomson Reuters Foundation.* http://poll2018.trust.org/

[12] Glinski S, (July 2nd 2019), Hidden Suffering: Afghanistan's Widespread Mental Health Crisis, The National online. https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/hidden-suffering-afghanistan-s-widespread-mental-health-crisis-881672?fbclid=IwAR14K4cQDa9XJ5Geu0WKE-BTo1D6khHzQNnR8BWvL0aGMysW8f_gR7DkCOc

throughout this research they demonstrated that they were keenly aware of the problems facing their families and communities.

Academic Context: Everyday Resistance and Quiet Encroachment

The extremely unbalanced male-centric power dynamics, deep-rooted physical insecurity and dire socio-economic circumstances which shape the lives of most rural Afghan women, necessitates a theoretical framework that recognises hidden intentions and behaviours as poignant, and which accounts for exploitative structural factors in analysing behaviours. James Scott's theory of everyday resistance is the most resonant framework with which to approach this research into rural Afghan women's resistance practices, due to the fact that it recognizes that poverty often equates invisibility[13] and that everyday forms of resistance 'reflect the conditions and restraints in which they are generated.'[14]

Throughout his academic career, Scott has given much consideration to the power interplay that exists between the dominant and the subordinate; the public transcript of how the two groups interact in front of an audience, compared with manifestations of resistance expressed by the subordinate group when the dominant, or oppressive group is not present. Drawing upon his observations regarding the meaning subordinate groups invest within discreet behavioural practices, Scott defines everyday resistance as:

> The ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimilation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander… and so forth…They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent an individual form of self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms.[15]

Scott later built upon this initial understanding of everyday resistance by developing his concept of 'hidden transcripts'; a 'risk-averse use of language by the powerless',[16] most notably taking the form of gossip, song, grumbling, storytelling and what many Afghan women refer to as 'backbiting' – saying

[13] Scott J, (1985), p12 – 13.

[14] Ibid, p242.

[15] Ibid, p29.

[16] Scott J, (1990), p30.

negative things about the dominant power, or those which this dominant power structure privileges over them. Scott points to how the hidden nature of these forms of resistance represents a survival mechanism, arguing that the greater 'the disparity in power [and…] the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask'[17] behind which the subordinate's true consciousness and intentions lie.

Supporting Scott's argument against the privileging of visible, political action, Anila Daulatzai presents a feminist justification for recognising the invisible and discreet. She states that:

> The mapping of a feminist political consciousness over the everyday concerns of [rural women] sets up a dichotomy between the oppressed, voiceless women on one side, and the heroic autonomous figure on the other […] the exclusive celebration of only certain forms of resistance ultimately discounts the everyday struggles of Afghan women in general, and represents a misreading of the complex forms of agency they enact.[18]

Integral to Scott's theory, and perhaps the aspect which has cast him most at odds with scholars such as Matthew Gutmann,[19] is his argument that the intentions behind the behaviours and actions should be used to define which actions constitute resistance, rather than an analysis of the consequences of those actions. This is what makes the everyday resistance framework so valuable to academic fields such as peasant, subaltern, resistance, feminist and minority studies; actions that seem too small to be considered significant by other resistance-based theories, such as contentious politics, are recognised as salient by the everyday resistance framework. However, if the intention behind an action is not driven by a desire to resist, that action cannot be categorized as everyday resistance, no matter the depth of structural change that results.

The significance of *intention* (or lack thereof) to resist as criteria for recognition of everyday resistance is integral to identifying rural Afghan women's behaviour as such. Throughout this research it became clear that the

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[17] Ibid, p3.

[18] (2008), The Discursive Occupation of Afghanistan, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies,* 35 (3), p431.

[19] Gutmann M, (1993), Rituals of Resistance: A Critique of the Theory of Everyday Forms of Resistance, *Latin American Perspectives,* 20 (2), pp74 – 92, 95 – 96.

women oscillate between intending to challenge patriarchal structures and navigating them in a completely non-ideological fashion, depending upon the arena (private or public) and the social norms the women wish to either challenge or support. Thus, when transitioning from the private domain to the public domain, the relevant theoretical framework switches from Scott's theory of everyday resistance to Asef Bayat's theory of quiet encroachment,[20] in order to best reflect the women's intentions.

Bayat addresses the conundrum posed by the everyday resistance framework thus: if consciousness is the decisive factor as to whether an act constitutes resistance regardless of the consequences, what then, should we call actions driven by necessity rather than conscious resistance which nevertheless result in favourable structural change of some kind? In answering this complication, Bayat develops the concept of 'quiet encroachment': 'the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied, powerful or the public, in order to survive or improve their lives.' He continues on to explain that 'while quiet encroachment cannot be considered a "social movement" as such, it is also distinct from survival strategies or "everyday resistance."'[21]

In recognition of the fact that quiet encroachment does not represent the deliberate actions of a social movement, Bayat coined the term "non-movement" to describe a scenario whereby 'the collective actions of non-collective actors tend to be action-orientated rather than ideologically driven; they are overwhelmingly quiet, rather than audible, since the claims are made largely individually rather than by united groups.' Furthermore, in non-movements, 'actors directly practice what they claim, despite government sanctions. Thus theirs is not a politics of protest, but of practice.'[22] These non-movements are distinct from performative everyday life because the actions carried out by individuals engaging in such non-movements are contentious; 'they subvert governing norms and laws and infringe on power, property and public.'[23] Public space, the labour market and land for housing is typically

[20] Bayat A, (2013), Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East (2nd ed), Stanford University Press; and Bayat A, (1997), Un-civil Society: The Politics of the 'Informal People', *Third World Quarterly,* 18 (1), pp53 – 72.

[21] (2013), p46.

[22] Ibid, p20.

[23] Ibid, p21.

quietly encroached upon, but in such a way as to shift the prevailing power dynamic just enough to accommodate the changes that have been made, making them durable for the long-term.

In the case of rural Afghanistan, women are often so marginalised that in many villages their access to public space is minimal, if not non-existent, which has a concurrently detrimental effect on their ability to generate an income, gain an education, socialise with other women, or exercise any kind of autonomy. We must bear this in mind in turning to the work of Richard Ballard, who describes the politics of non-movements in such a way as to demonstrate their resonance with rural Afghan women perfectly: 'people trespass onto spaces on which they are not "allowed" […] and in doing so, appropriate the very soil [of those spaces].' They challenge established assumptions and as a result of these reconfigured power relations, 'individuals can "step out" of the futures expected for them',[24] as mundane practices carried out by the many consequentially shift social norms. This claiming of public space, and subsequent legitimization of women as public actors, is a phenomenon that will be evidenced shortly.

Though neither Scott nor Bayat focus exclusively on gender, their theoretical frameworks are extremely adaptable and easily applied to societal and domestic power dynamics characterized (as they are in Afghanistan) as being extremely patriarchal. By way of demonstrating this adaptability, Scott stresses that whilst his theory of everyday resistance cannot be applied uniformly to all scenarios of power distribution, there are certain structures of domination to which everyday resistance theory can always be applied successfully:

> These forms of domination are institutionalised […] they embody formal assumptions about superiority and inferiority often in elaborate ideological form, and a fair degree of ritual 'etiquette' regulates public conduct within them. In principle at least, status in these systems of domination is ascribed by birth, mobility is virtually nil, and subordinate groups are granted few, if any political or civil rights […] Thus these forms of domination are infused by an element of personal terror that may take the form of arbitrary beatings, sexual violations and other

[24] (2015), Geographies of Development III: Militancy, Insurgency, Encroachment and Development by the Poor, *Progress in Human Geography,* 39 (2), p219-220.

insults and humiliations.[25]

This description of domination perfectly illustrates the prevailing means of control that men routinely exercise over women in Afghanistan. The resonance of everyday resistance with patriarchal forms of domination perhaps explains why so many feminist academics have employed Scott's theory in their research.[26]

One of the defining features of both Scott and Bayat's theories is the recognition that through focusing on seemingly insignificant and non-confrontational acts, we can recognise what is so often overlooked in academic writing associated with the fields of politics, conflict and resistance studies. This is particularly evident regarding the resistance practices of Muslim women, which, Bayat recognises, often go unrecognised within Western academia.[27]

Postcolonial Feminist Theory

Before presenting the results of this research, a brief overview of the final, yet important facet of the reviewed literature is required. Due to the focus of this research being marginalized women, complimented by the interweaving of Islam as a theme throughout, combined with the politicization of the status of Afghan women by U.S Coalition forces, this research was heavily influenced by postcolonial feminist theory.

Anila Daulatzai,[28] Saba Mahmood,[29] Lila Abu-Lughod[30] and Christine

[25] Scott J, (1990), p21.

[26] See for example: Slymovics S, (2014), 'Algerian Women's Buqalah Poetry: Oral Literature, Cultural Politics and Anti-colonial Resistance', *Journal of Arabic Literature,* (45), pp145 – 168; Abdmolaei S, (2014), '(Re)Fashioning Resistance: Women, Dress and Sexuality in Iran', *Anthropology of the Middle East,* 9 (2), pp38-55; Wells J, (2003), 'The Sabotage of Patriarchy in Colonial Rhodesia: Rural African Women's Living Legacy to their Daughters', *Feminist Review,* 75, pp101 – 117.

[27] Bayat A, (2013), p5.

[28] (2008), pp419-435.

[29] (2006), Feminist Theory, Agency and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt, *The Finnish Society for the Study of Religion: Temenos,* 42 (1), p31-71.

[30] (2002), Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others, *American Anthropologist,* 104 (3), pp783-790.

Jacobsen[31] all agree that there is a fundamental problem, characterized by cultural imperialism, in the way in which feminist scholars often approach Muslim women as research subjects, thus creating an adversarial relationship between feminism and Islam. Mahmood argues that feminist scholarship often only recognises resistance and agency when they conform to 'norms of secular-liberal feminism and the liberatory telos', and in which 'the conceptualization of agency [is restricted] to acts that further the moral autonomy of the individual in the face of power.'[32] She continues on to explain that the prevailing model of agency:

> That seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power […] sharply limits our ability to understand and interrogate the lives of women whose sense of self, aspirations and projects have been shaped by non-liberal traditions.[33]

An integral feature of the cultural imperialism imposed upon Afghanistan is the failure of western feminism to adequately grasp religious piety in its complexity, given the fact that western feminism is informed by the principles of autonomy and freedom.[34] The repercussions of this failure to comprehend the complex nature of piety and agency in Afghanistan continues to hinder successful development and peacebuilding, as international actors seek to transform Afghan society and shape it in the mirror image of the west. The consciousness and moral arithmetic which motivates the everyday resistance practices of the rural Afghan women who participated in this research demonstrates that a mirror image of the West is not what they desire at all.

This article seeks to demonstrate that rural Afghan women are keenly aware of their shared priorities, those aspects of social phenomena they support, or willingly adhere to, those they wish to challenge and change, and importantly, how to affect change in such a way as to develop more socially cohesive communities which represent the women's interpretation of their faith. In prioritizing the collective over the individual and positioning their interpretation of Islam as a framework for guidance in both the public and private sphere, it is evident that rural women have the understanding and

[31] (2011), Troublesome Threesome: Feminist Anthropology and Muslim Women's Piety, *Feminist Review,* pp65-82.

[32] (2006), p31.

[33] Ibid, p33.

[34] Jacobsen C, (2011), p70.

agency to reimagine their own future and affect positive change. Yet time and again rural communities, and rural women in particular, are ignored by policy makers and development charities, distilled to the falsified generic image of passive victim.

Resisting vs Challenging

Before examining the resistance practices of rural women, it is important to note that the focus group participants did not initially recognise their behaviour as resistance, due to their conception of resistance as visible, organized and collective; the opposite of the discreet individual acts these women employed. Further, they were uncomfortable with the word 'resistance', perceiving it as implying behaviour they deemed to be un-Islamic; for example by overtly challenging their husbands' authority and subverting the gender roles formulated by their perception of Islam as well as their culture and traditions.

When discussing the 2018 protests in Jalalabad,[35] a city in Nangahar province, during which several women took to the streets to protest against the ongoing conflict between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the research participants unanimously agreed that women-led collective action is contrary to social and cultural norms. However, there was a sense of ambiguity regarding whether or not such behaviour should be considered contrary to Islamic principles. During these discussions, impending violence and negative community reprisal remained at the forefront of the women's minds, as one participant in Herat explained:

> [Rural] women are too scared to protest in the streets. They are fearful that the community and male relatives will treat them badly if they do this, or say bad things to them. For this reason we wouldn't dare to do this.[36]

Though women-led protests remain very rare in Afghanistan, they can be seen to symbolize the dichotomy between urban and rural women in terms of societal tolerance of women engaging in contentious politics in public, but also in terms of what women themselves perceive as acceptable behaviour.

[35] Shaheed A, (14th June 2018), Nangahar Women March in Support of Ceasefire, *TOLO News*, https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/nangarhar-women-march-support-ceasefire

[36] Focus group conducted on 26th February 2019.

After discussing the word that they would choose to describe how they react to power and behaviours they don't like, or deem to be un-Islamic, the women preferred to refer to their behavioural practices as 'challenge' rather than resistance. In keeping with the linguistic preference of research participants, the word 'challenge' will therefore be used hereon instead of 'resistance'. The distinction between discreet forms of intentional acts of everyday resistance and overt forms of more confrontational resistance should be remembered here. Due to the latter being unrecognised by rural Afghan women as part of their arsenal or behaviours and actions, 'challenge' is interchangeable with 'everyday resistance' only.

Parameters of Resistance

In the case of rural Afghanistan, conflict and insecurity restrict arenas for women's resistance by rendering certain conflict-affected public places unsafe. The male narrative, however, seizes upon this insecurity as a means through which to control women by confining them to the home or their immediate neighbourhood, purportedly for their own safety. As will shortly become evident however, whilst security issues are legitimate concerns, men often exaggerate the danger posed to women by their own communities in order to dissuade them from leaving the home, enabling men to retain absolute control over them. This dominant controlling male narrative is a manifestation of the extremely patriarchal structure of informal governance which exists throughout rural Afghan communities, which are often far removed from Kabul and the Afghan government's women's empowerment policies.[37]

Rural Afghan women are governed by an intimately personified manifestation of power. This is particularly the case within the home, where through this power, they are subordinated to immediate male family members, before being subordinated to men in their wider community.[38] The women who participated in this research engage in everyday resistance practices

[37] See the Afghan government's 2007 – 2017 National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan (NAPWA), extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/afg149120.pdf; and Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 – Women, Peace and Security, 2015 – 2022, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Afghanistans%20National%20Action%20Plan.pdf

[38] Manjoo R, (2015), Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women it's causes and consequences, (A/HRc/29/27/Add.3).

which are constricted by the omnipresent threat of physical violence, but also oppressive, gendered cultural and social norms. These norms administer strict gender roles, impose judgements upon a woman's (and by extension her family's) honour if she breaches them, and almost entirely eliminate public spaces as a venue in which rural women can deliberately challenge power structures.[39] By way of illustrating this, women in Injil district explained the difference that attending vocational classes had made to their lives. One explained that before, "I was like a prisoner in my home", while a second described how the community polices women's behaviour: "people used to back-bite [talk about us negatively] if they saw us walking; they would ask us why we were on the street."[40] It is clear that the women find community behaviour towards them in public spaces extremely intimidating, with possible violence against them either within the community or within the home an ever-present associated threat for infractions of social norms.

In addition to male-privileging narratives of danger, absolute male control of both public and private space, and the ever-present threat of physical violence, children represent a further parameter of resistance. Research participants explained how they often consciously strive to tolerate the bad treatment meted out to them by husbands, as a deliberate strategy through which to protect their children from witnessing domestic violence and experiencing a negative atmosphere within the home.[41] Therefore, rural women make a conscious decision not to employ challenging behaviours which endanger either the physical or psychological wellbeing of their children.

Throughout the course of the focus group discussions, it became clear that the national-level Afghan government strategies and policies for empowering women were either unheard of, or considered irrelevant, and viewed as a waste of time. The women are uninterested in legislation and policy frameworks, viewing Islam as the only guidance their communities required. Incidentally, some research participants support the Afghan government,

[39] See Amnesty International: Women's Rights in Afghanistan: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/issues/womens-rights-afghanistan; Safi S, (1st July 2018), Why Female Suicide in Afghanistan is so Prevalent, BBC, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44370711

[40] Focus group conducted on 27th February 2019.

[41] Focus groups conducted in Injil and Herat districts between 25th – 27th February and Balkh and Mazar-i-Sharif districts between 2nd – 4th April 2019.

whereas others support the Taliban. When discussing women's rights and empowerment, a participant in Mazar-i-Sharif explained 'Islam supports women's empowerment so it's very important [to define empowerment in accordance with Islamic principles]. Before Islam, people believed that women had no value, when Islam came it gave rights to women and made men and women equal.'[42] Islam is omnipresent in women's thought processes and expressions of discontent as they manifest into challenging behaviour. It provides the framework through which behaviours displayed by men (or manifested as patriarchal norms) are deemed to be illegitimate or unfair, and therefore justifiable resisted, or compliant with Islam and therefore to be respected. Each focus group was asked the question: 'what do you like about being an Afghan woman?' The unanimous responses were always varying forms of 'I'm happy to be Muslim',[43] or 'Islam is very important to us, we are Muslim and we are proud to be Muslim.'[44]

Interestingly, the majority of research participants were illiterate and so were reliant on others to read the Quran for them. Yet despite this, the majority of the women asserted that the dominant power structure and its brutally oppressive treatment of women is contrary to the teachings of the Quran and the protection that it affords women. The likely explanation for the disjuncture between Quranic and religious interpretation on the parts of the dominant (males) and subordinate (females) is that as part of community sensitization to the concept of women's empowerment programmes, the foreign NGO of which the research participants were beneficiaries employs community organizers to discuss women and Islam with the dominant males of a community. Once the community accepts the establishment of women's vocational training, the women are also taught about Islam and women's rights within it. While the men may not recognise a more gender-sympathetic understanding of Islam as immediately advantageous, the women obviously do, and so likely absorb what they have learned.

Focus group participants were clear that they will not engage in behaviour which contradicts their duties as identified through their interpretation of Islam, thereby positing Islam as the final parameter of resistance. The rural women who participated in this research perceive Islam as a much less

[42] Focus group conducted on 2nd April 2019.

[43] A comment repeated in multiple focus groups.

[44] Ibid.

oppressive structure of social governance than prevailing cultural norms, and therefore view it as supportive of women's challenging behaviour, but only so long as such behaviour doesn't challenge the role of the male as an authority figure. Thus, the majority of rural Afghan women who participated in this research support and hope for a form of imagined, or constructed, benign patriarchy, as distinguishable from the extreme patriarchy which currently prevails in rural Afghanistan. The latter, they believe, misinterprets Islam and imposes what the women perceive as unfair restrictions whilst simultaneously sanctioning violence against them.

Challenging Patriarchy in the Home

When discussing whether women challenge things that men ask them to do, the ways in which men behave, or male power, all of the women bar one stated that they do challenge such things. One young woman in Balkh district, who at the time of the focus group was unmarried, was the only participant to voice disagreement with the other women on this matter. This particular young woman argued quite forcefully that it is a woman's duty to do everything her husband or father tells her to do, and that women should dedicate their lives to keeping their husband happy. When asked by another participant why she believes this to be true, the young woman responded, 'it is in the Quran. This is what is what is expected of Muslim women.'[45] Some of her fellow focus group participants began to get visibly exasperated with her, trying to persuade her that *their* less extreme interpretation of the Quran and Islam were in fact the authentic version of the religion. This young woman was a lone voice of dissent in wholeheartedly supporting extremely patriarchal norms, but the other women's response to her was so audible because they were in a safe women-only space. They all acknowledged that they would not have discussed this matter so forcefully with their husbands or fathers, as it would have likely resulted in them being physically beaten for their insubordination, implying that their daily lives consist of practicing false deference to extremely imbalanced cultural and social norms which posit an extremely patriarchal interpretation of the Quran as authentic.

False deference appears to be a much-practiced form of everyday resistance employed by the rural women who participated in this research, utilized due to fear of extreme violence dissuading them from acting in open defiance. This fear of violence forces women to maintain a veneer of

[45] Focus group conducted on 4th April 2019.

deference to their husbands and extremely patriarchal norms, despite their consciousness railing against the violent behaviour and unfair treatment regularly enacted by their husbands. When discussing the male behaviours and power structures that women challenge, the majority of women identified domestic violence as something that they do challenge, but which simultaneously influences the method of challenge employed. The women explained that in order to avoid physical harm, and to prevent their children from witnessing violence, they will often follow orders without visibly demonstrating any form of discontent when in the presence of their husbands, instead choosing to grumble and moan about him behind his back. As a group of participants in Balkh district explained, 'even if we are upset we have to do all the housework. If we don't, he will beat us'. [46] This group of women continued on to state that 'we don't strongly challenge our husbands in order to reduce conflict in the home. Even if our husbands have been really bad to us we try to behave normally as if nothing has happened.' All of the participants of this research who were mothers recognised this as a behaviour they consciously employ regularly in order to protect their children.

Aside from domestic violence, other forms of undesirable male behaviour the women resisted included placing unfair demands upon women, such as expecting delicious meals despite there being very little food, expecting women to perform household chores at the whim of the males in terms of arbitrary time frames and standards, and 'un-Islamic behaviour', a term which in the context used implied sexual acts that the women did not want to participate in.

Unfairly expecting delicious, varied meals to be made from very little was a common complaint among focus group participants, with one of the women again illustrating how, given the omnipresent and overbearing threat of violent repercussion, the women don't directly challenge their husbands on the matter, but rather:

If our husband tells us to cook him something, and he tells us to do it in a rude way, behind his back we will grumble to ourselves, saying things such as 'he doesn't bring me anything to cook with, so why should I cook for him?'[47]

[46] Focus group conducted on 4th April 2019.

[47] Focus group conducted in Herat district on 26th February 2019.

The method of resistance described here involves grumbling in such a way that questions the husband's very masculinity, highlighting his inability to perform the expectations set by male gender norms, in conjunction with the corresponding hypocrisy at expecting her to perform the gender roles stipulated for women. This expression of resistance is interesting because it uses the extremely patriarchal norms, which usually privilege men *against* the husband, reducing him not just to an undesirable husband and father, but also a failure as a man.

Whilst discussing individual practices with participants, as the above examples illustrate, it was consistently made clear that the majority of women do not overtly challenge their male relatives (usually husbands), with these women stating simply 'whatever he says I do.' The majority of these women explained that with violence being a very possible repercussion for open dissent, 'even if I don't like something, I have to do it.' Most participants described their methods of challenge as behaviours that enable them to avoid violent repercussions through their hidden nature, whilst simultaneously providing the women with an outlet for their frustration. One participant explained, to the concurring nods of her fellow participants, that, 'we cannot refuse him directly so we defy him indirectly',[48] therefore indicating that the intention to challenge is very much present.

An external actor observing these women behaving in such a deferential manner without seeking their narrative may mistakenly assume that these women are either compliant or acquiescent to the dominant power structure of extreme patriarchy, or completely devoid of agency. However, this external observer would actually be viewing an expression of 'calculated compliance'[49] which masks the defiance these rural women truly feel. As Scott notes, subordinates in highly unbalanced circumstances of power will engage in 'routines of deference and compliance which, while perhaps not entirely cynical, are certainly calculating.'[50] The calculated nature of this behaviour is inherent within the process of judging which acts of challenge are likely to result in physical violence being administered as punishment, and acting through false deference or reluctant compliance as a means of avoiding such physical harm. As a woman in Herat district explained:

[48] Focus group conducted on 26th February 2019 in Injil district.

[49] Scott J, (1985), p278 – 284.

[50] Ibid , p278.

> It is exceptional that a woman can refuse to do what a man tells her without him reacting violently. Most of the time if the woman refuses to do something, the man will hit her and make her do it by force.'[51]

Subversive childrearing

Aside from employing calculated compliance in the presence of their husbands, these women had also found a discreet way of utilizing the strict gender roles enforced by extreme patriarchy, which dictate that women should be solely responsible for raising children. Saba Mahmood makes an observation which is poignant here, in explaining that:

> What may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of this enactment. In this sense, the capacity for agency is entailed not only in acts that resist norms, but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.'[52]

The rural women who participated in this research illustrated this point by describing how they subvert extremely patriarchal norms which sanction violence against women by weaponizing and embarking upon a transformative approach to their childrearing practices. The women described how they consciously challenge extreme patriarchy and work to improve society for future generations of women and girls, by teaching boys to be kind and respectful to girls and treat them as their equals. Thus, women were deploying their sons as agents of change for the future. Women from Balkh district explained, 'if our sons are trained to be behave well with women and respect them, of course the future will be better for Afghan women';[53] while women from Herat district stated that 'We try to train our older sons to be good to their sisters and women inside the home',[54] believing that once they had achieved this goal with their older sons, male behaviour would exponentially improve towards women in the wider community.

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[51] Focus group conducted on 26th February 2019.

[52] Mahmood S, (2006), p42.

[53] Focus group conducted on 26th February 2019 in Injil district.

[54] Focus group conducted on the 26th February 2019.

The women who participated in this research sought not only to influence the direct interaction between boys and girls as future men and women, but they also sought to erase the normalization of violence against women by teaching their sons not to engage in violence at all; they forbid their sons from hitting girls, as well as from hitting their brothers, friends, or other boys within the community. This form of subversive childrearing has the potential to be a catalyst for effective, albeit gradual, grassroots change in social norms among communities, because when general violence is dramatically reduced, a man hitting a woman will be amplified. In contrast, individual acts of violence against women are currently diminished by the many other acts of violence occurring on a daily basis against men, women and children.

Such subversive childrearing practices are not motivated exclusively by a desire to improve gender relations, though this is a significant factor. Rural women are also consciously raising their sons in such a way as to develop community resilience to conflict. One focus group in Balkh district told a particularly harrowing tale[55] of the violence inflicted upon their village by both the Taliban and the Afghan government forces, who regularly fought each other both inside the village and around its periphery. The women told of how the continuous conflict has led to an increase in the presence of criminals who are also terrorizing and exploiting the village. They described how a five-year-old girl was kidnapped on her way home from school. The kidnappers asked her parents to pay a ransom, but the parents had very little money and were subsequently unable to pay. The kidnappers killed the little girl and removed her organs, before dumping her body in front of her parents' house.

The women were clearly traumatized by this, and lamented the fact that they are now terrified of sending their children to school. However, the women are extremely proud of how unified their community is and identified this tightknit unity as the sole reason that the community and social support networks have not yet crumbled. For this reason, the women emphasized, they instil within their sons the importance of respect for all family and community members, explaining how:

> We don't fight, even the children don't fight. If we catch any of the children fighting we tell them to stop and explain that it's not good for

[55] Focus group conducted on the 4th April 2019.

> our community - we should be united, we should be good, we should be friends.'[56]

The women continued on to assert that 'we consciously behave this way to keep conflict out of the village.' While the men likely support the women in raising their sons not to fight other boys, the women's extension of this emphasis on unity as applicable to the treatment of girls and women is undoubtedly also an intentional act designed to challenge the prevailing gendered power dynamics and concurrent sanctioning of violence against women.

In addition to future reduction of violence against women and girls, along with a conscious effort to increase community resilience to conflict, the women also justified challenging patriarchal norms through childrearing in terms of ensuring that their sons grow to be good Muslims. The women expressed a desire to see their sons diverge from the current behaviour of their husbands, fathers and brothers, who the women view as exercising violence and coercion which is incompatible with their understanding of Islam.

Before moving on to examine how women challenge patriarchal domination in women-only spaces, a final note should be made on how women employ challenging behaviour within the home. A small number of participants diverged from the established pattern of exclusively engaging in calculated compliance and subversive child-rearing as a means of challenging male power whilst ensuring self-preservation, sometimes veering over into more overt forms of resistance. For example, a woman in Mazar-i-Sharif stated 'if I don't like what my husband tells me to do, I just won't do it. Even if he becomes violent I won't do it.'[57] Islam is consistently the tool women use to define male behaviours which were justifiable versus those which were not: 'If what [my husband] is asking me to do is in accordance with Islam, I will do it, but if it contradicts Islam, I won't do it.'[58] Statements such as this were met with exclamations of shock, awe and reverence, as fellow research participants expressed their wonder at the bravery of these women who employed open defiance as a form of challenging male behaviours they did not like, acknowledging that such behaviour could

[56] Focus group conducted in Balkh district, 4th April 2019.

[57] Focus group conducted on 2nd April 2019.

[58] Focus group conducted on 2nd April 2019.

potentially be fatal. However, the women who did engage in overt defiance explained that defiance is always a last resort. The reason for this is that in openly defying their husbands, the women feel frustrated and ashamed of themselves, believing themselves to have failed to behave as they think good Muslim wives should, according to both cultural and social norms, as well as in accordance with their own interpretation of Islam. There appears to be an inherent dissonance here between the women's interpretation of Islam and the meanings they assign to their motivations for and methods of challenge, as on the one hand they recognize that Islam protects them and provides them with rights, but on the other hand, even if they judge the actions of their husband to be un-Islamic and thus justifiably resisted, the women nevertheless feel guilty and ashamed for resisting.

Challenging Patriarchy in Women-only Spaces

For rural women resisting extremely patriarchal power, the resistance practices they employ outside of the home are no less discreet than those they employ within the home, constrained as they are by similar parameters of resistance. All of the women acknowledged the self-help benefits of gathering together as a women-only group in order to share their experiences and support each other. One participant stated that having access to a safe, women-only space is one of the most important things in her life, explaining 'while we are here we can forget about what is happening at home.'[59] Scott acknowledges the importance of solidarity among oppressed groups in his writing, but unlike the Malay peasants he researched, who imposed sanctions on those who breach the bonds of solidarity,[60] Afghan rural women impose no such sanctions or ostracization. Rather, because the behaviour they engage in within women-only spaces is deemed to be illicit by prevailing patriarchal and social and cultural norms, the women simply ensure that they only engage in such behaviour around women they know they can trust:

> Talking and making jokes about our husbands with other women who we trust helps us support each other and cope with the situation at home. However, it can be dangerous to behave this way with women we don't know very well or don't trust, as if such things get back to our husbands it will make life very difficult for us.[61]

[59] Focus group conducted in Mazar-i-Sharif district on 2nd April 2019.

[60] Scott J, (1985), p261-263

[61] Focus group conducted on 4th April 2019 in Balkh district.

'Talking and making jokes' about husbands is the primary form of resistance practiced in women-only spaces, and falls definitively within the category of everyday resistance which Scott calls 'hidden transcripts.' All married focus group participants acknowledged that they consciously engage in such transcripts, recognising them as a coping mechanism. Invariably, when asked for examples of such behaviour, the women relaxed and became extremely animated, even quite rowdy in two or three groups, as they laughed and joked about the derogatory things they tell each other about their husbands. Scott describes oral hidden transcripts as 'risk-averse use of language by the powerless',[62] which includes gossip, slander, jokes, storytelling and other uses of language which are consciously utilized to resist the oppressive power and dominant individuals.

Such hidden transcripts are very much present in the resistance repertoire of rural Afghan women, who gave examples such as 'we talk about our husbands to each other all the time…all day we backbite about our husbands. From morning to evening [when we women are together] we are backbiting about our husbands.'[63] This particular comment was made amid much laughter and joviality. Another participant of the same focus group elaborated by explaining, 'making jokes amongst ourselves, backbiting about our husbands and making each other laugh about the situation helps us to survive. It makes us feel better.' Focus group participants in Balkh district explained that:

> 'If a husband is a good man; behaves very well and is friendly and kind, his wife will say only good things about him and feels proud that she has such a good husband. If the husband is bad [the wife] will backbite and tell the other women that he is a very bad man.[64]

Along with examples of jokes and 'backbiting', some of the participants also hinted that they make derisory comments and jokes about their husband's sexual performance – a taboo in conservative rural Afghanistan.

Regardless of the specific contents of the hidden transcripts employed by rural women, the very act of speaking about their husbands can be viewed as simultaneous self-help, conscious challenging of individual men and,

[62] Scott J, (1990), p30.

[63] Focus group conducted on 26th February 2019 in Injil district.

[64] Focus group conducted on 4th April 2019.

additionally, an act of symbolic challenge to prevailing patriarchal social and cultural norms. As one woman explained:

> Whatever our men do to us, it should remain within our family. We shouldn't speak about these things outside of our families. We are trained to be like this by our culture. We are trained to accept whatever happens to us. To make ourselves feel better we share whatever happens to us at home with other women, but only women.[65]

It is clear that in the context of rural Afghanistan, sharing experiences, performing hidden transcripts, and supporting each other in this fashion is actually a tremendous act of rebellion.

The Quiet Encroachment of Public Space and Reproduction of the Ordinary

As discussed in the methodology, all research participants were beneficiaries of vocational training programmes implemented by a foreign NGO in women-only community spaces, with the objective of these training programmes being income generation and subsequent economic empowerment. Focus group questions therefore explored both the public and the private realms as arenas of resistance, since these women were no longer confined to their homes. During the course of this research it became clear that although women were consciously engaging in resistance practices within the private sphere, endowing these practices with 'symbols, norms and ideological forms',[66] when striving to gain access to resources available in the public sphere, something different was happening. Once outside of the private sphere, these rural women ceased to articulate or demonstrate conscious ideological or physical struggle against the dominating power. Rather, their motivation for striving for economic empowerment, or access to public space, was one of apolitical, non-gendered necessity due to the extreme poverty faced by their families.

This section of the article seeks to delve further into the ambiguities, nuances and contradictions expressed by rural Afghan women, through their articulated desire to achieve economic empowerment in a non-

[65] Focus group conducted on 26th February 2019 in Injil district.

[66] Scott J, (1985), p38.

confrontational manner that is compatible with a patriarchal and Islamic system of social governance. It is here where intention to resist ceases, but unintended consequences nevertheless result from the women's actions. Therefore, we will transition from Scott's theory of everyday resistance to Bayat's theory of quiet encroachment in order to understand the social phenomena evident in the rural communities in which these women live.

The 'Non-movement' of Rural Afghan Women

Key to the concept of non-movements is the fact that 'they are not based in ideology, nor on organized demands, nor are they coordinated as such.'[67] As has been discussed throughout this article, rural women dare not engage in visible collective action due to fear of violent repercussions. In this instance, once attending vocational training, women also do not engage in *invisible,* or discreet, collective action. Rather, each woman acts by herself, for herself and her family, seeking the development of a skillset which will enable her to generate a modest income with which to support her children and husband, and allow her to send her children to school. This non-organized, collective action of individual women who independently and quietly encroach upon public space and resources purely in order to generate an income, with no intention of challenging the dominant patriarchal authority, is a clear manifestation of Bayat's concept of 'non-movements'.

Many of the research participants had previously been confined to the home for most of their lives, but in some rural areas of Afghanistan, extreme poverty interacts with extreme patriarchy in such a way as to present an opportunity for women. The men in these women's lives recognise that women working also benefits men in terms of the women being able to provide their families with basic necessities. Once granted permission to leave the house, the initial extent of the women's access to public space consists of walking between home and the women's-only space in which vocational training is being held. However, as women begin to hone their vocational skills, their need to access a greater area of the community and interact with unrelated men increases: they need to learn how and where to purchase raw materials, how to market their products, network among potential buyers and sellers and advertise. These actions were all well outside of the remit of women's gender roles before these research participants started performing

[67] Ballard R, (2015), p219.

them, but over time their male relatives and community members recognised the benefit of women accessing public spaces in order generate an income, as the women were increasingly able to financially support their families whilst concurrently contributing to the economies of their communities. Thus, women's presence in public space gradually became legitimized: 'now that we come [to this vocational training programme] and the community has accepted this, we are free to go anywhere. They no longer ask us where we are going or criticize us.'[68]

Reproduction of the Ordinary

The values, motivations and perceptions of rural Afghan women concerning men and patriarchy are complex, incredibly nuanced and sometimes contradictory, but they are at all times informed by the importance of Islam and the perceived necessity of consciously behaving as good Muslim women; not because they are coerced into piety by men, but because the women themselves aspire to be good Muslims, constantly holding themselves to account against their own interpretation of Islam.

It is clear that within the home and private women-only arenas, rural women consciously challenge *extreme* manifestations of patriarchy. It is the threatening and violent behaviour of individual men and the power wielded by these men to severely restrict women's life opportunities that are being challenged, rather than the patriarchal system itself. Extreme patriarchy sanctions these behaviours, but the women themselves recognise such oppression as un-Islamic, inherently in conflict with the rights provided to women within the Quran, according to their understanding of it. During focus group conversations it was clear that rather than an abolition of patriarchy, the women desire a more benign patriarchal system of social governance, which will provide rights and opportunities whilst adhering to the Quran. As such, many of the women lamented the fact that their men cannot find opportunities for employment.

For the majority of rural women, their construction of the perfect world provides employment for both husbands and wives, enabling them to operate as partners in decision making processes within the home, the latter being a common objective among research participants. In this hypothetical perfect world, though the male would retain traditional patriarchal status

[68] Focus group conducted on 3rd April 2019 in Mazar-i-Sharif district.

and ultimate authority, he would wield this power benevolently, and importantly, allow women to make decisions regarding the home and family. Part of the reason for this determined adherence to patriarchy is perhaps that the majority of participants of this research trust men's decision-making capabilities far more than their own, believing that the Quran says that 'men and women think differently',[69] and that 'men can give better advice than women because they are aware of the [political] situation.'[70] Moreover, lived experiences count for a great deal. For example, the village in Balkh district (which has been subjected to much violence by the Taliban, Afghan government forces and criminals) remains unified and resilient under the guidance of male community leaders, therefore the women from this village see no reason to address a gendered power imbalance which has succeeded in keeping the community strong. Thus, these rural women are content to live under a patriarchal structure of governance, provided that it is not extreme and succeeds in providing an element of broader community-level protection from conflict.

The Unintended Consequences of Quiet Encroachment

Rural women's quiet encroachment into public space and the labour market has resulted in unplanned consequences. A gradual community-level structural change has taken place which has seen extremely patriarchal social norms diluted and transformed, as they begin to accommodate women in public spaces, and in some cases actively support women's economic endeavours rather than merely tolerating them. Participants explained: 'people in the community used to backbite if they saw us out walking in the community and questioned why we were out in the street. Now they recognise our right to be there.'[71] One woman in Injil district identified a total shift in behaviour towards women within the community, describing how 'the community has started to respect us because the community needs what we produce. The community reaches out to us now.'[72] In this case, the quiet encroachment

[69] Focus group conducted on 2nd April 2019 in Mazar-i-Sharif district.

[70] Focus group conducted in Injil district on 26th February 2019.

[71] Focus group conducted on 27th February 2019 in Herat district.

[72] Focus group conducted on 25th February 2019.

of rural women upon the public spaces within their communities, driven purely by the desire to generate an income and feed their families, rather than resisting and challenging prevailing power dynamics, has resulted in visible and experiential structural change defined by an expansion of gender roles and corresponding shift in social and cultural norms.

Perhaps one of the most enlightening personal aspects of gaining access to public space is rural women's realization that they had previously spent years living in fear of the community unnecessarily: 'We aren't scared to leave the house now, and in this respect, we feel like men […] There is no fear for me now, whereas before, even if my family gave me permission to leave the house, I was too scared.'[73] This statement was echoed by many women and symbolizes how increased mobility has consequentially resulted in reduced fear, in turn contributing to increased community cohesion.

Throughout discussions with research participants, it became evident that a correlation exists between generation of income, increased presence in public space, and the increased confidence displayed by these rural women as they move around the community and provide for their families. As a result of their increased mobility and participation in the labour market, gender roles which used to restrict every aspect of rural women's lives have shifted considerably, as have gender stereotypes. As some of the participants explained:

> Before we didn't have permission to do anything. Our families didn't believe in our ability to do anything. This has changed due to our income […] At first when we wanted to attend this [vocational skills-training programme] our men didn't believe that we'd learn anything. Now they realize that they were wrong, and they are surprised by how much we've learned […] We get more respect now. Our families want us to teach them what we've learned, including the men.[74]

These statements illustrate how women have unintentionally transformed rural gender roles and stereotypes in their communities. Whereas women were previously confined to the home through a deliberately fear-inducing

[73] Focus group conducted on 2nd April 2019 in Mazar-i-Sharif district.
[74] Focus group conducted in Herat district on 27th February 2019.

male narrative, prevented from gaining an education or employment and viewed as incapable of learning or working, now they are respected and recognised as having the ability to independently utilize public spaces, learn, make informed decisions, but also, exert authority over men through interactions which posit women as teachers and men as their students. Research participants exclaimed that they had expected to teach their children and female neighbours what they learned through training programmes they were attending, but they had not expected to be asked to teach men. The women expressed an overwhelming sense of pride at having the ability to do this, a sensation which is new to many of them, and one that they hold dear. Furthermore, as women begin to provide for their families financially, they are gradually able to gain respect from family members and rise to a position of equal importance to the husband within the home. Though the women stated that the husband retained overall authority, they are satisfied and proud at being able to participate in decision-making processes concerning the domestic sphere – an expansion of gender roles which is earned purely by financial means, but one that is life-changing for the women involved. As one research participant in Mazar-i-Sharif succinctly stated, 'We are someone now. Our families rely on us.'[75]

Conclusion

The overwhelming majority of these rural women consciously employ everyday resistance practices in the private sphere, most notably: false deference, calculated compliance and subversive childrearing within the home, and hidden transcripts such as jokes, derogatory comments and backbiting in women-only spaces. Due to the omnipresent nature of the extreme patriarchal structure of power and related threat of physical violence as a form of coercion and control, which permeates every aspect of rural women's lives, they necessarily engage in hidden resistance practices in order to avoid severe violence at the hands of their husbands or other male relatives, thereby ensuring self-preservation. Again, it is important to reiterate that the women are consciously resisting individual male behaviours which are violent, oppressive, unfair or perceived as un-Islamic, rather than patriarchal authority in general. The women express no desire to abolish patriarchal authority provided it transforms into a more benign structure and aligns with their women-friendly, sympathetic interpretation of Islam.

[75] Focus group conducted on 3rd April 2019.

The home represents the primary battleground for most women due to it being the site of sometimes extreme domestic violence, but also because the home is where the husband (or other male relative) exercises the power to permit or forbid women from leaving the house, with related consequences for mobility. Once this battle has been won, either by the women, or on their behalf, the women cease to resist wider patriarchal structures as they exist within the community. In seeking access to public space and the labour market, the women do not exhibit a conscious motivation to challenge patriarchal authority, but rather they act out of financial necessity; husbands are either unemployed, on a meagre income or deceased, and so the women take it upon themselves to provide an income for their family, valuing the self-sufficiency and reduction of social barriers that most of them experience as a result.

Crucially, the women have sought and gained permission from their husbands or other male relatives to leave the home and utilize public space in order to attend vocational training programmes, and thus have engaged with the prevailing extreme patriarchal authority on its own terms in order to secure their objective. The resulting income they generate benefits both their families and community, so this mutually beneficial arrangement works not to abolish patriarchy or replace men as sole breadwinner, but to transform social norms in such a way as to accommodate women and their newly expanded gender roles. Therefore, the non-movement of rural women as they quietly encroach upon public space can be seen to have had the unintended consequence of structural change; transforming extreme patriarchy in such a way as to render it more benign (in relative terms), but ultimately maintaining the patriarchal societal structure.

Though their quiet encroachment upon public spaces and the labour market has served to diminish the severity of extreme patriarchal social norms and community governance structures, the women continue to reinforce the patriarchy on a daily basis by deferring to male authority, particularly with regards to political issues and issues of governance. They also support the role of men as the absolute figure of authority within the home and community, but only so long as these men exercise this authority by behaving in accordance with the women's interpretation of the teachings of the Quran, treat women in a kind and respectful manner, and permit them to engage in decision-making processes within the home as equal partners. Islam is the over-riding framework for judging whether behaviour is legitimate or illegitimate, justifiable or unjustifiable, to be tolerated or challenged. The

women recognise Islam as inherently patriarchal, but they are willing to adhere to it, viewing it as a force for protection and empowerment; a defence against the existing system of extreme patriarchy and relentless conflict.

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