

Schriften zur interdisziplinären
Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung
Series on Interdisciplinary
Women's and Gender Studies

| 15

Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad

Afghan Women in Solidarity

**Counter Narratives on the Dialectics
of Oppression and Token Recognition**



Nomos

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Women's and Gender Studies

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Volume 15

Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad

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The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

a.t.: Frankfurt am Main, Univ., Diss., 2021

Original title: Narratives of Suffering – Narratives of Hope.
Afghan Women and Girls in Solidarity: A Qualitative Analysis

ISBN 978-3-7560-0342-6 (Print)
978-3-7489-3642-8 (ePDF)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-3-7560-0342-6 (Print)
978-3-7489-3642-8 (ePDF)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ahmad, Aisha-Nusrat
Afghan Women in Solidarity
Counter Narratives on the Dialectics of Oppression
and Token Recognition
Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad
186 pp.
Includes bibliographic references.

ISBN 978-3-7560-0342-6 (Print)
978-3-7489-3642-8 (ePDF)



Onlineversion
Nomos eLibrary

D30

1st Edition 2024

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*My deepest gratitude to the incredible girls and women
I was privileged to meet during the research in Afghanistan,
for sharing their stories with me.*

This book is dedicated to them all.

Acknowledgment

This book is the result of my PhD project, and every research project works through the commitment of many members. In the following, I would like to give you an insight into the research team because this book would not exist if it were not for these people. Prof. Dr. Dr. Phil C. Langer was the principal investigator of this research project and was supported during the conceptual phase by Prof. Dr. Angela Kühner. Through successful application, he made this project possible and allowed me to become part of the research project as a research assistant and to conduct field research in Afghanistan actively. I will be forever grateful for this unique experience. Equally important are the Afghan colleagues. Without their commitment, this project could never have been carried out in this capacity. My infinite thanks go to Farhad, Khesraw, Nasera, Shamisa, Munira, Obaidullah, and Milad, and Ulrike Auge. You may have noticed that I have only mentioned the first names of my Afghan colleagues. I do this so as not to put them in an unsafe position, as some of them are still living in Afghanistan. These people have actively contributed to the project by conducting field research, giving conceptual and theoretical inputs, and analyzing the data. I also want to thank Prof. Dr. Claudius Wagemann for co-supervising my thesis.

My deepest thanks, however, go to the young people in Afghanistan who took their precious time to participate—whether it was through interviews, essays or drawings. It is they who have given us access to the world of their thoughts. They told us what they feared and worried about, but also what they hoped and wished for. Publishing the work at this time is particularly agonizing for me because they are living in circumstances that they feared the most. This is also the reason why I have struggled for a long time with the question of whether and how to publish this work, which I had completed in early 2021.

I want to thank my dearest friends and family Flaminia, Kinza, Klaus, Maik, Phil, Shmail, Sidra, Tazaeen, Thomas, Zaheer and my parents Zahida and Naseer for their constant encouragement and support for the project and to finally publish this book.

Acknowledgment

Above all, however I am publishing this work to fight against the oblivion of women and girls in Afghanistan. Above all, I want to share their agency and solidarity.

Berlin, February 29, 2024

Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Good morning. I'm Laura Bush, and I'm delivering this week's radio address to kick off a world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the Al-Qaida terrorist network and the regime it supports in Afghanistan, the Taliban. That regime is now in retreat across much of the country, and the people of Afghanistan - especially women - are rejoicing. Afghan women know, through hard experience, what the rest of the world is discovering: The brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists. ... Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror - not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan, we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us. ... Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. ... The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women (Bush, 2001).¹

This excerpt was part of a weekly radio address given by Laura Bush on November 17, 2001 justifying the invasion of Afghanistan.² For the first time in history, an entire weekly address was delivered by a First Lady of the United States. 20 years later, on August 31, 2021, President Joe Biden announced the end of the longest war in the history of the United States of America and the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan. On August 15, 2021, the Taliban had retaken power, proclaiming the reestablishment of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan", a title previously used from 1996 to 2001. Leaving the Afghan people, including *Afghan women* with the very Taliban they had once come to liberate them from. Women in particular, who had

1 The full address can be found here: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html>.

2 Chapter 2 will delve deeper into the address and its implications within the context of US politics. It will likely analyze the speech's content, its reception, and its potential impact on various political stakeholders. This chapter may also explore the broader political landscape surrounding the address, including any policy shifts or reactions from other political actors.

once served to legitimize the War on Terror, were ultimately left defenseless. Afghan women and their position in Afghan society and globally have been used as pawns by both international and Afghan actors.³ Since August 2021, the social fabric in Afghanistan has been shattered once again, the situation for Afghans has deteriorated dramatically.

Afghanistan's economy has collapsed, and its currency has depreciated, leading to hunger and a high risk of malnutrition. Out of 43.1 million 23.7 million people in Afghanistan are in need. 17 million people are facing acute hunger, while 6 million are at emergency levels of food insecurity—only one step away from famine and thus representing one of the highest figures worldwide. Some 3.3 to 3.5 million people have been internally displaced by the conflict (OCHA 2023). Currently, more than 7 million Afghans have fled to neighboring countries—Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Afghan refugees constitute one of the largest refugee populations in the world. Especially since August 2021 Afghanistan is facing also a rapid brain drain leaving the country struggling to retain its intellectual capital as many educated Afghans that worked for the past US-backed governments, for NGOs or in the education sector are forced to leave Afghanistan for safety purposes. At the same time humanitarian aid is only possible to a limited extent, leaving especially women and girls behind.

Between September 2021 and May 2023 alone, the Taliban issued more than 50 edicts that severely restrict various aspects of women's lives in Afghanistan. One of the restrictions began just one month after the Taliban regained power on September 18, 2021, when education for girls beyond sixth grade was abruptly restricted. On December 23, 2021, additional restrictions were placed on women's mobility, as men drivers were instructed not to transport women without "proper hijab" or a mahram for distances exceeding 72 kilometers. The imposition of dress code and travel restrictions became increasingly stringent. Starting from March 27, 2022, women and girls faced further limitations in their daily lives. Access to parks was restricted, and a ban was imposed on domestic and international flights for women without a mahram. These measures further curtailed the freedom of movement for Afghan women. On May 7, 2022, a new mandate required women to observe "proper hijab," preferably by wearing a chadari, and discouraged them from leaving their homes without a valid reason. The imposition of strict dress codes extended to female television presenters

3 Chapters 2 and three will elaborate on this in more detail.

on May 21, 2022, when they were mandated to cover their faces. Since the Taliban have taken over the power, education has become a major target of these restrictions. On June 1, 2022, all girls in fourth to sixth grades were obligated to cover their faces while commuting to school. Young women with scholarships abroad were prevented from leaving the country unaccompanied since November 2022 due to the mandatory maharam policy and on December 20, 2022, the right of women to attend university was suspended. A severe blow to the girls' and women's aspirations for higher education. The ongoing suppression of women's education renders Afghanistan the sole nation globally to entirely halt girls' and women's access to education.⁴ Within a span of under two years, the Taliban have undone the majority of advancements achieved in women's education from 2001 on. Also, the limitations on women's involvement in the workforce have escalated. On August 23, 2022, women government workers were asked to stay home from work. Prohibitions were then imposed on women using gyms on November 10, 2022. On December 24, 2022, the right of women to work with national and international non-government organizations was suspended, further limiting their professional opportunities. These edicts by the Taliban have been significant setbacks for women and girls in Afghanistan. Women have been gradually excluded entirely from political and public life since August 2021. The Ministry for Women's Affairs was transformed into the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, eliminating women's representation and their access to decision-making. Women's participation in the civil service has significantly decreased, despite the Taliban asserting that they are still being paid (OHCHR, 2023)⁵. The Taliban's actions have led to a drastic reversal of the

4 It is however noteworthy that in the Taliban leadership girls' and women's access to education is contested. Figures like Mullah Berader, the First Deputy of the Taliban cabinet, who played a key role in the Doha negotiations with the United States, and Abass Stanikzai, presently serving as Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, appear to hold more moderate views and support women's education. Conversely, the faction led by Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, the leader of the Taliban (referred to as Amir ul Mo'menin), enforces a stringent policy opposing women's education (Amin & Clausen, 2023, p. 5).

5 As of October 7, 2021, the UN Human Rights Council created the role of a Special Rapporteur to assess the human rights situation in Afghanistan. Richard Bennett assumed this position on April 1, 2022. Over the period between September 2022 and June 2023, he issued three country reports providing an overview of the human rights situation in Afghanistan. His most recent report, dated June 15, 2023, specifically delves into the conditions faced by women and girls.

progress made in women's rights and political participation in Afghanistan from 2001. Due to these constraints, it is unsurprising that the mental well-being of women and girls in Afghanistan is significantly compromised. Despite Taliban assertions that suicides have decreased, and mental health has improved since August 2021, there are widespread reports of depression and suicide, particularly among adolescent girls who are barred from pursuing education.⁶

Back in early 2021 when I initially finalized the manuscript, a quick search on google scholar on the terms “Afghanistan” and “women” suggested the following terms “rights,” “Taliban,” and “oppression,” as frequently used together in the search engine. Who could have guessed that we would be forced to use these terms again within a few months only?⁷ Back then I wondered or rather struggled whether there was a need for another piece focusing on Afghan women—primarily written by a non-Afghan? My intuitive answer back then was: No, not really! Way too much has already been written and said on Afghan women's situation by scholars, journalists, politicians, humanitarian activists—the list could go on and on. Still, the common dominator would be that the majority are non-Afghans. Wimpelmann has rightfully asserted that, in the context of (contemporary) Afghanistan, “... so many careers have emerged out of a sudden imperial rush to understand, map, and transform the country, can quickly appear exploitative” (Wimpelmann 2017, p. 19), thus, fueling further the global inequalities of knowledge production. To make matters worse, much of what has been written so far about Afghan women is in a paternalistic manner that subjugates Afghan women in the role of passive victims without any form of agency. This discursive representation, however, does not do justice to the subjective realities of Afghan women.

6 In a survey conducted in March 2023, 47.6 percent of the 1,005 respondents knew at least one woman or girl who had experienced anxiety or depression since August 2021. Alarming, 7.8 percent of respondents (164 individuals) were aware of a woman or girl who had attempted suicide. Every woman interviewed by the experts expressed serious concerns about the mental health of women and girls. A mental health practitioner consulted by the experts estimated that 90 percent of students, young women, and girls are grappling with poor mental health. She emphasized that the restrictive environment limited her ability to support these individuals since she lacked a maharam (OHCHR, 2023).

7 Checked on January 29, when in 0.09 seconds, around 517,000 results were found: 2021: https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=de&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=Afghanistan+women&oq=af.

Among others, these were some of the main reasons I was very hesitant to write on this matter for a long time. Eventually, I decided to write on this subject. You might reasonably ask what made me change my mind. The short answer back in early 2021 would have been simple: the data made me do it! To be more precise, back then I was motivated by the strong narratives of the girls and young women I came across during the Afghan Youth Project fieldwork⁸. The narratives where you find “... the contradictions of a simultaneous existence of laughter and suffering, fear and hope, indeterminacy and wont, creativity and discipline, and absurdity and commonplace” (Nordstrom & Robben 1995, p. 10). The narratives are too strong and powerful and the perspectives they provided so unique to the discourse and political debate that, drawing attention to these accounts felt too important not to give them the dedication they deserved.⁹

Afghan Youths’ Position before August 2021

What makes these narratives so unique? The perspectives of young people are rarely considered in research, especially those living in war and conflict zones around the world. However, children and adolescents are a highly vulnerable group in general; in war and conflict zones, their vulnerability is amplified, as they are significantly affected by the ongoing violence and its far-reaching and profound consequences. Especially in the context of Afghanistan, the voices, and perspectives of youth, who are numerically the largest group in the country, have hardly been included. Attention has been predominantly given to political and military actors as well as warlords.

No one under the age of 45 has ever lived in a state of peace in Afghanistan. The extent of traumatic experiences of violence, displacement, and flight is high, and the resulting psychosocial consequences are devastating. However, it does not take direct experience of violence on one’s own body to move on from the everyday violence that surrounds someone, that inscribes itself in social practices, in families, that perpetuates itself across generations. Before 2021 the term “lost generation” was often invoked. However, I argue that now the term betrayed generation may be particularly apt for Afghanistan.

⁸ I will describe the research project in more detail below.

⁹ To honor these narratives, I had decided to explore them in my doctoral thesis because this framework offers me the possibility to fully focus on only these narratives and to address the manifold dimensions—social, political, and historical.

While looking at the state of the art, young people's perspectives are severely underrepresented in the scholarly discourse on Afghanistan and so is the perspective of the so-called ordinary population and the everyday realities of the people in Afghanistan. The existing research literature on Afghanistan predominantly examines persistent issues and conflicts through the lens of powerful actors such as neighboring states and warlords (see on China, e.g., Sharma, 2010; on Pakistan, Akhtar, 2008; Zingel, 2014; on Iran, Carter, 2010). Geopolitical and economic interests, the role of warlords, efforts to combat corruption and narcotics, and institutional developments are among the topics explored (cf. Peceny & Bosin, 2011; Hussain, 2012;). This focus intensified with the onset of ISAF military operations and Operation Enduring Freedom after 2001, addressing questions of asymmetric warfare, state-building, and democratization. However, this research often neglects the perspectives and agency of the ordinary population, partly due to the historical context where the general population was not historically perceived as political actors (Barfield, 2010, pp. 216–218). Additionally, studies that do focus on the everyday experiences of Afghans tend to emphasize suffering.¹⁰

10 In particular, two groups that are seen as vulnerable are the focus of research interest due to their precarious legal and social situation or are constructed as research objects: Girls and women on the one hand, and children and adolescents on the other. While research on girls and women particularly highlights their marginalized status within a feudal-patriarchal structured society shaped by strongly gendered cultural and religious norms, points to the need for reform, especially in the legal system, and examines perspectives to be created for improved participation in education, social, and political decision-making processes (cf. e.g., Winthrop, 2003; Amiri et al., 2004; Fluri, 2008; Rostami-Povey, 2007a; Rostami-Povey, 2007b; Manganaro & Alozie, 2011), children and adolescents are primarily researched as victims of conditions characterized by poverty and violence. In a 2005 epidemiological study of 287 school children aged 7 to 15 in Kabul, for example, Catani et al. (2009) conclude that 51% of respondents report at least one war-related violent event, 15% within the past year. At the same time, they point to a high prevalence of violence in the family environment. Overall, 42% of the children surveyed (30% of girls, 51% of boys) met the A1 criterion of a traumatic event according to the DSM-IV psychological diagnostic manual; 14% of girls and 26% of boys met all DSM-IV criteria for probable PTSD. A study conducted in 2006 in three Afghan cities, in which 1,011 children and adolescents aged 8 to 16 years, as well as many caregivers, and 358 teachers were interviewed (Panter-Brick et al., 2009), came to a similar conclusion that was even clearer regarding the extent of the violence experienced. More than 8 out of 10 of the children and adolescents questioned (83%) had been displaced involuntarily due to violent conflict or economic reasons, almost half (45%) had been displaced three times or more. About 10% had lost one or both parents. Sixty-four

Even if the findings of the studies of the considerable social extent of everyday experiences of violence and their far-reaching individual consequences for children and adolescents in Afghanistan are undoubtedly relevant, they have significant weaknesses. First, they are based on selective samples that can claim only limited field coverage due to their metropolitan focus, omitting regions with high levels of violence and children and youth who lack access to education. Systematic consideration of children's and adolescents' diverse regional, social, and gender-specific realities is only available to a limited extent. Second, the assessment of violent events and the measurement of traumatic impact is usually carried out using concepts and psychometric instruments developed in Western contexts. Their transferability to the Afghan situation is quite problematic.¹¹ Third, the existing research literature is inscribed with a problem-oriented psychological reductionism that focuses on psychological and psychiatric disorders due to experiences of violence. This is remarkable in two respects: First, if one follows the available empirical findings, most children and adolescents seem to cope "well" with the experiences (whatever this may mean exactly in detail) despite the extensive exposure to violence. This is in line with the findings of Antonovsky's (1997) classic study of Jewish survivors of Nazi concentration camps, which led to the establishment of the salutogenetic approach, in which concepts of identity-related sense of coherence and resistance resources are central.

percent of the children and adolescents in the study reported at least one traumatic event. The authors summarize: "The most distressing lifetime trauma was related to violence; this encompassed injury, witnessing violence to another person, the death or disappearance of close relatives, living in a combat zone, and forced displacement" (*ibid.*, p. 812). At the same time, the authors point to a high prevalence of violence in domestic and community contexts and economic hardship, and widespread and sometimes physically hard child labor. This finding is consistent with the research of Trani et al. (2013), who diagnose structural, multidimensional child poverty with far-reaching consequences also for health. Overall, over 22% of the students surveyed would meet the criteria for a probable psychiatric disorder. Remarkably, another study by Bronstein et al. (2012) of 222 adolescent male asylum seekers aged 13 to 18 in the United Kingdom came to similar findings; however, the prevalence of (probable) PTSD was significantly higher at about 34%, which may be related to the background and trajectory of flight and experiences as asylum seekers.

- 11 As Renner et al. (2006) showed based on a study of the cross-cultural validation of PTSD instruments with asylum seekers from Afghanistan, among other countries. Therefore, a culturally sensitive (further) development of basic concepts, research methods, and instruments seems necessary.

For research on resilience following Antonovsky's conceptualization, it would be necessary to ask what individual *damage* is caused by experiences of violence and what psychosocial resources must be available to integrate them meaningfully into one's self-concept. On the other hand, research almost exclusively stops at the findings of exposure to violence and its consequences, conceptualized as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As important as it is to have robust data on the psychosocial implications of exposure to violence to make the situation of those affected by it political, to place political decision-making processes on an empirical basis, and to develop and implement targeted therapeutic interventions, a trauma understanding that is truncated to PTSD is problematic (Becker, 2014; Langer et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2011). The described approaches take a psychopathologizing, individualizing, and decontextualized view and assume, unrealistically for people in conflict and war zones, that there is a return to a normal state free of violence: This is precisely what the "post" in the diagnosis indicates. From a sociological-social psychological perspective, on the other hand, the sociopolitical background must always be considered. In the Afghan Youth Project's concrete context, we asked what the subjectively profound effects of the experiences of violence mean for the sociopolitical imagination and capacity for action of young people, for their social agency.

In the international context, some exciting and insightful studies did head in this direction. Panter-Brick and Eggerman, with their study on youth exposure to violence in Afghanistan, were mentioned above. Using the same sample as their 2009 study, they choose a more qualitative research approach for another contribution, which methodologically overcomes the reductionism criticized above and thus appeared to be connectable to the Afghan Youth Project (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010). Using open-ended questionnaires, they recorded critical life events and how they were dealt with and analyzed the data thus obtained in terms of content analysis. In presenting their findings, they point to the importance of a "sense of moral and social order," which they associate with "key cultural values: faith, family unity, service, effort, morals, and honor... These values form the bedrock of resilience, drive social aspirations, and underpin self-respect and dignity" (ibid., p. 71). In this regard, the authors understand their study as a contribution:

... to a small but growing body of work on resilience in public health and conflict settings. It demonstrates that culture functions both as an anchor for resilience and an anvil of pain, and highlights the relevance