“Dangerously Radical?” - Explaining the position of the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan in Post Taliban Afghanistan

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This is for the women of Afghanistan: their strength and perseverance through so much is the reason for this work.

“With all my strength I am with you” (Meena)
The Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan is an organisation that provides a fascinating insight into understandings of gender, national identity and universal human rights. In its construction of a universal human rights message for women in Afghanistan the group responds to the philosophical debate surrounding universal rights and cultural relativism, and the support and criticism coming from the international feminist movement. In order to understand the way that RAWA has framed itself and its message, it is imperative to examine the ways RAWA has responded both to the international principles of universalism and feminism, but also to the national history and culture they operate in. RAWA’s firm local grounding and sense of unique history mean that they control, rather than are controlled by, international principles.
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This work is substantially my own, and where any part of this work is not my own, I have indicated this by acknowledging the source of that part or those parts of the work

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INTRODUCTION

“But to do anything and be anybody at all - is an aspiration indigenous to women across place and across time.”

The description of the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA) by journalist Noy Thupkaew as “dangerously radical”, exemplifies the essential challenge that the group faces as an organisation with universal principles in a local society not accepting of them. Furthermore, RAWA itself also offers an enormous challenge to the understanding of human rights, the role of gender in Islam and perceptions of feminism as alternatively universal or a purely western construct. RAWA’s message of universal rights questions the notion of the hidden and weak Islamic woman. At the same time it is difficult to ignore the constraints that Afghan history and culture place on a women’s group seeking societal transformation. The problem with assessing RAWA is an inevitable level of superficiality, as they are either wildly praised for their uncompromising stance against fundamentalists (and more controversially their western supporters), or condemned for being too universalist, too constrained by culture, too extreme, or too western. When these apparently dichotomous conceptualisations occur, the result is a desire to label and neatly categorise RAWA. This is particularly evident in the analysis that currently

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2 Thrupkaew. Noy (2002)“What do Afghan women want? A dramatic and militant Afghan feminist group has captured the West's imagination. But does it offer what the women of a shattered society need most?” The American Prospect, August 26, 2002 v13 i15 p27(4)
exists from the outside. This thesis seeks to uncover the intersection between the international principles of RAWA and the local context, and to position RAWA appropriately within post-Taliban Afghanistan. Understanding of this intersection is ultimately what is required to explain the group and its ideology.

Chapter One of this thesis will look specifically at RAWA as an organisation; why it exists, how it works and what it stands for. RAWA makes a bold claim to be representative of ‘the ‘silent majority’ in Afghanistan and continually asserts that it is, “in front of the oppressed but freedom-loving women and men, to continue its uncompromising struggle against murderers, fundamentalists, their lackey intellectuals and their foreign masters, without any compromise or diplomacy.”

This is in direct response to the continual gross and systematic human rights violations of women in Afghanistan. This is perhaps one of the more extreme examples of a culture that seemingly creates, endorses and perpetuates abuse. In the face of this evidence a conclusion that “the pashtuns are just like that” seems understandable, but ultimately unhelpful, in appropriately understanding human rights in Afghanistan, and RAWA’s place in it. RAWA make the assertion that because they find Afghanistan’s current situation devastating, then so too must the rest of the population. It makes this political statement in its framing of a human rights message for women in Afghanistan. At the same time, the group operates like an aid NGO - delivering food, running hospitals and schools in order to attract support to give their claim to representation legitimacy.

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5 Bernard, Carol (2002) Veiled courage: inside the Afghan women’s resistance Milsons Point, NSW: Random House pg 9
Chapter Two will examine the national context that RAWA is responding to, specifically the situation of women in Afghanistan. This belongs in a broader picture of understanding the role of women within the Islamic faith. The lack of rights for women in Afghanistan today is far more than purely a product of either culture or religion. There is a specific historical and national context that must be understood as influencing the politicisation of the religion. Furthermore, the conservative patriarchal tribal systems have used the Islamic construction of gender to continue pre-existing practices of marginalizing women. The recent decades have been tumultuous for Afghanistan, with successive regime changes. Gender policies have always been part of the competition between political forces in Afghanistan. Throughout the different regimes women have been caught in the tussle between traditional and modernist forces. There is an imbalance in the analysis of this process, even among liberal interpretations of Islam, that seeks to emphasise women as victims of Islam, and denies the role of activists such as RAWA. RAWA’s ideology responds to this with a rejectionist Islamic feminism. This particularises women’s equality within the liberal Islamic struggle for secular government within Islamic societies.

Chapter Three will show how RAWA relates to human rights theory through their objective of adding rights to Afghan culture. The issue of women’s rights as human rights is a vexed one that too easily results in a stalemate between those who follow the discourse of universal application of rights and those who believe that culture is all encompassing. All too often the day-to-day experiences of women, and the complex intermingling of the constraining forces of nation, culture, history,

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economics and family, are obscured. The case of women in Afghanistan is particularly pertinent in highlighting this trend.

The ultimate difficulty with both universalist and cultural relativist dimensions is that they seem to preclude the fluidity of culture and of perceptions surrounding rights, and often deny agency to those suffering from rights abuses. This makes it doubtful whether either approach can explain the existence and significance of RAWA- a Muslim women’s group, which operates under universalist principles but with the distinct constraints of Afghan culture. While Afghan women are supposed to be represented by human rights, the debate obscures their agency. As Michael Ignaetiff has said, “Human rights have gone global, not because it serves the interests of the powerful, but primarily because it serves the interests of the powerless.”7 It is this purpose of rights that RAWA responds to in its project of adding rights to culture, which also informs an understanding of the adding of culture to universalism.

Chapter Four seeks to examine the relationship between RAWA and feminism, and the impact of their national context on the relationship. RAWA has been interpreted as having a feminist message of equality and social justice. In the west this has been seized upon as a means for glorifying the group and showing the universality of feminism. This is a clear example of essentialism that denies RAWA’s local grounding. Also there is a sense, particularly from a number of western feminist critics, that this group is asking for too much, and too soon. Furthermore, their relationship with the west makes them vulnerable to claims of a lack of authenticity. RAWA responds to this through an emphasis on their local context and independent

7 Michael Ignaetiff (2001) Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry, Anansi Press Ltd, Toronto pg 4
identity. At the same time they don’t distance themselves entirely from the essential financial support and membership power of the international movement. The important point for RAWA is not where support comes from, but that this should not diminish the maintaining of unique identity and independent political stance.

The very existence of RAWA, fiercely nationalistic and determined to see the realisation of universal human rights within a democratic Afghanistan, refuses to allow analysis of their international influences and national context to end at the point of discussing the incompatibility of culture and human rights. Ultimately, unless that message is heeded, understanding of the group, and of human rights in Afghanistan will remain superficial. More broadly an understanding of this interaction highlights the constraints and difficulties of effecting change in the field of gender in human rights.
CHAPTER ONE

RAWA: History and the Framing of a Human Rights Message

This chapter will look specifically at RAWA, what its stands for and how it operates to frame a locally based universal human rights message. This process will be examined in three sections. The first section will introduce the organisation and its goals. The second section will look at RAWA’s reason for existence - the ongoing subjugation and abuse of women in Afghanistan. The third section will outline how RAWA has responded to this national context with the framing of a universal rights message for women within Afghanistan. What is uncovered is the way that RAWA deploys deliberate tactics of moral pressure and persuasion to appeal to both the domestic and international community, and claim legitimacy as representatives of the Afghan people, women especially.

RAWA: History and Objectives

RAWA was founded in 1977 by Meena Keshawar Kamal as a political organisation among students and intellectuals in Kabul. Their key objective has always been “to involve an increasing number of Afghan women in social and political activities aimed at acquiring women’s human rights and contributing to the struggle for the establishment of a government based on democratic and secular values in Afghanistan.” 8 Over time the activities of RAWA have shifted and expanded from activities such as supporting opposition to Soviet occupation and the puppet Parcham

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and Khalaq parties in government, to the documenting of human rights abuses under the Jehadi and Taliban periods, and beyond.9

The concept of revolution and the term revolutionary is at the core of the organisation. RAWA has a unique interpretation of the concept that runs somewhat counter to typical images of violence and rebellion that the term conjures up10. Member Mariam explains that, “We believe that in a country where women are not counted as human beings and are treated worse than cattle, working for women's rights and secularism is a great and revolutionary struggle and it is because of this fact, that we call ourselves ‘revolutionary.’”11 This situates the group firmly within Afghanistan, where it is a profound shift in norms to value educating girls, not accept violence and abuse, and to be a woman publicly expressing political views.12

It is important to note the ways that RAWA has responded and evolved along with the changing circumstances within Afghanistan. This is something they point to as the reason for their continued existence over the past 30 years. They are proud of the fact that, “for years RAWA has been warning countries not to support these monsters…We refused to be intimidated and continued our struggle under difficult and risky situations”.13 During the Soviet period, their role in the supporting resistance was their primary focus. However, this was combined with, where possible,

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12 Brodsky Anne (2003) With All Our Strength: pg 45
13 Brodsky Anne (2003) With All Our Strength: pg x
providing education for girls and addressing women’s needs.\textsuperscript{14} Their support for the resistance fighters completely disappeared following the 1989 Soviet withdrawal when the fundamentalist factional fighting created a four-year period of civil war and lawlessness. RAWA’s belief that this represented a betrayal of Afghanistan can be seen in the refusal to use the term muhajideen (freedom fighters) any longer, but jehadi instead.\textsuperscript{15} The struggle now was not to protect Afghanistan from outside, but to challenge fundamentalism. This further intensified following the establishment of the Taliban government in 1996. RAWA saw the necessity to expand technologically and gain contact with the outside world.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite the constant change in circumstances there are several key aspects for the organisation that have not changed. The nine point RAWA charter establishes a broad mandate that includes:

- Seeking women’s emancipation
- Advocating for the separation of religion and politics,
- Supporting equal rights of ethnic groups
- Encouraging economic democracy
- Drawing women into social and political activity.
- Providing service to women and children in the education, healthcare and financial arenas,
- Establishing relations with other national and international pro-democracy and pro-women’s groups.
- Supporting other worldwide global freedom and women’s movements

\textsuperscript{14} ibid, pg 61
\textsuperscript{15} ibid 63
\textsuperscript{16} ibid 101
• Committing to “struggle against illiteracy, ignorance, reactionary, and misogynistic culture.”17

While different periods have brought different priorities, the charter has remained unchanged and all projects fit somewhere within the nine points.18

Another constant throughout RAWA’s 30 years has been the attention to security. Due to the intense security risks of running such a subversive organisation, the vast majority of RAWA’s openly identified activities are in Pakistan, where members fled to escape persecution under the Soviet regime and to support the massive influx of refugees into the border areas. RAWA schools and hospitals and occasional food distribution missions were established to provide essential services for these refugees.19 These services are also in existence within Afghanistan, but covertly. RAWA’s political protests have led to government refusal for official status as an aid organisation.20 This means their activities within Afghanistan remain underground. Any projects go under the name of other aid organisations and all approximately 2000 members protect their identity through a complex system of aliases and small independent committees that have no knowledge of any others.21 Following the 1987 assassination of founder Meena by the KBG backed fundamentalist group Gulbuddin Hekmatyar RAWA does not have a single leader but a senior leadership council, whose identities are closely guarded.22 This attention to security is a central part of RAWA’s daily operations and highlights the extreme risk that members face, not only

17 Kolhatkar Sonali (2006) “RAWA: A model for social Activism and Social Transformation”
18 Brodsky Anne (2003) With All Our Strength: pg 9
19 Sohaila (2007) Talk on RAWA for Sydney University Student Representative Council Women’s Collective delivered at Sydney University 26th July 2007
20 ibid
21 ibid
from government sanction, but also through retaliation from fundamentalists and those who vehemently oppose women’s rights.

In examining RAWA’s goals it is perhaps best to separate the long-term political aims from the daily activities. Long term RAWA is agitating for a secular democratic Afghanistan, as it is their belief that this provides the best opportunity for women’s equality and the respect of human rights.23 This is the centre of everything they do. As member Sohaila stated in a recent talk at Sydney University, “Governments have misused Islam. That’s why we don’t want religion to have anything to do with government. We don’t want people forced to do things they don’t want.”24 The key way they seek to achieve this is through public exposure of what RAWA perceives as the current problems within Afghanistan, specifically the foreign occupation, fundamentalism, and human rights abuses against women. Protests are staged to mark significant occasions such as International Women’s Day, the assassination of Meena, and the beginning of US occupation of Afghanistan. This is where RAWA has the most visible public profile, specifically in Pakistan.

On a somewhat quieter but more widespread level RAWA seeks to effect change in Afghan society through service to the community. The daily running of schools, orphanages, women’s adult literacy centres, hospitals and mobile clinics is not designed simply for altruistic means. It does fulfil that particular category but it is mainly a vehicle for engagement with communities, families and women. It is the beginning of an ongoing discussion with RAWA about women’s rights and women’s ability to take an interest in politics and play a role in public life. RAWA describes it

24 Sohaila (2007) Talk on RAWA for Sydney University Student Representative Council Women’s Collective delivered at Sydney University 26th July 2007
as a process where “gradually when we work with them, talk with them, live in their communities, they realise we are working for them.”

Thus the short term goals of service to the community are understood to operate subsidiary to the long term political goals.

Human rights for women in Afghanistan

This section will seek to provide a snapshot of life for women under the Taliban and life for women after it to provide some understanding of the situation for women in Afghanistan that RAWA is responding to. The recent decades have seen several key periods: The Soviet Occupation (1979-1989), the Muhajadeen period (1992-1996), The Taliban government (1996-2001), and finally post September 11 American occupation (2001). Gender policies have always been part of the competition between political forces in Afghanistan. Throughout the different regimes women have been caught in the tussle between traditional and modernist forces, and the strongest example of this is the Taliban period.

The Taliban regime’s treatment of women in Afghanistan is a clear-cut example of state-based human rights abuse of women. Life for women under the Taliban was affected by two essential and interlinked factors: the Taliban’s policy of “erasing women completely from public life”, and the ongoing general vulnerability of women to physical and sexual abuse, within a society experiencing. As mentioned earlier the Taliban follows the Wahabi sect of Islam. This sect, and its particular focus on

25 ibid
obedience and punishment, provided the official religious justifications for the harsh activities of the Vice and Virtue Squad, also known as the religious police. Beatings for momentary lapses in dress code such as a slip of a covering were common, as were stonings and public executions for adultery.

The term ‘gender apartheid’ is a commonly used and particularly apt description of the Taliban’s treatment of women. Some of the more common rights violations for women that were directly attributable to Taliban were numerous restrictions on liberty included working outside home without an accompanying male (relative) or the chadari (burqa). Girls’ attendance at school was entirely banned. Noise from women’s shoes or their raised voices were prohibited (both considered erotic). House windows were painted over so no female occupant could be seen. At a more pervasive level, these restrictions had impacts on rights such as the right to health and to seek medical assistance. The inability to see a male doctor, and the extreme shortage of female doctors made seeking medical treatment extremely fraught, and in fact there were cases of women being shot for appearing in public while trying to seek urgent medical attention for their children. Thus, what occurred under the Taliban was an official and public endorsement of the segregation and subjugation of Afghan women, a practice long in existence before the regime, and continuing presently.

28 Ibid
Available at http://www.state.gov/www/global/women/fs_980310_women_afghan.html
There was an explosion in external interest surrounding women in Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks and much analysis focused on the situation of women under the Taliban. Laura Bush and Cherie Blair spearheaded this sudden interest by linking the liberation of Afghan women to the American and wider NATO presence in Afghanistan. This focus, is laudable in finally bringing international attention to the issue. However it obscures the very long struggle that has taken place, and the reality that the Taliban regime was not the entire reason for human rights abuses against women. The ‘distraction’ of the burqa is particularly flawed as it conceals the more complex issues surrounding women and human rights in Afghanistan. It was essential that the Taliban’s policies and their devastating consequences gain international attention, and RAWA ensured this through its undercover documenting and reporting. At the same time it is important to acknowledge the necessity for the struggle for women’s rights to be inextricably linked with the history of the country, and not any particular regime or policy.

Valentine Moghdam has made an attempt at a broad analysis by examining the position of women throughout the numerous changes in Afghanistan during the 20th century. Importantly, this was not a purely descriptive exercise. Moghdam links history to the discussion around universalism and cultural relativism in order to

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33 CNN (2001) Interview of Saba Sahar, Spokesperson of RAWA
See also Cornell D (2003) “Facing Our Humanity” Hypatia vol. 18, no. 1 (Winter 2003) pg170-175
34 Daily Telegraph UK (2001)’Lifting the veil on what Afghani women really want’ 11th January 2001
(Spring, 2002), pg 20
explain the lack of western feminist action concerning Afghan women prior to the Taliban. It is her view that especially during the 1980’s, “Afghan women were held hostage to the notion that women’s rights were western and that the modernising government of Afghanistan was merely replicating the so called bankrupt western (or Soviet) model.”\textsuperscript{38} Analysis of Afghanistan that focuses purely on the Taliban era is thus flawed not only because it fails to understand the multiplicity of issues affecting women but also because it fails to acknowledge Afghanistan’s long period as a weak state. This is particularly important as, “The existence of a weak modern state in a predominantly patriarchal and tribal society has had adverse implications for reform and development, as well as for the advancement of women.”\textsuperscript{39} Thus it is impossible to examine the status of women in Afghanistan without looking at the broad challenges of post conflict reconstruction and the democratization process.

The treatment of women in Afghanistan today has a basis in tradition and has been exacerbated by over thirty years of a complete lack of security for the nation. In present day Afghanistan reports of abduction, forced marriage, child marriage, rampant domestic and sexual violence, and a general atmosphere of fear and hopelessness leave no doubt that the human rights situation for women in Afghanistan remains beyond dire.\textsuperscript{40} There is a widespread acceptance of domestic violence, rape and other forms of sexual abuse against children. Forced marriage accounts for up to 80% of marriages in some regions.\textsuperscript{41}

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\textsuperscript{38} ibid pg 40
\textsuperscript{39} ibid pg 44
\textsuperscript{40} Amnesty International (2005) ‘Afghanistan: Women still under attack - a systematic failure to protect’ 30\textsuperscript{th} May 2005 page 2
Available at: http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA110072005?open&of=ENG-AFG
Date Accessed: 31.3.2007
\textsuperscript{41} ibid pg 18
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off girls to settle debts. More broadly, prohibited interaction between non-related men and women curtails women’s abilities to participate in society. Education, work and formal and informal justice mechanisms are out of the reach of the majority of women, especially outside of Kabul. This leads to a pervading sense of hopelessness among women. Self immolation is increasingly seen as the only means of escape. Several times in the city of Herat over three hundred cases of self immolation were officially recorded in three-month-periods. These atrocities are the result of a complex interaction between the longstanding attitudes of women’s inferiority within Afghanistan and the exacerbation of these by the present complete insecurity of the country.

The information presented above calls into question the claims of the present Afghan government that it is successfully dealing with the situation. The development of a new constitution for Afghanistan, the establishment of a minimum number of seats for women in the new government and the participation of women in last elections in 2005 are all hailed as markers of progress. Article 22 of the Afghanistan Constitution now proclaims the equality of men and women. In a 2007 International Women’s Day statement President Harmid Karzai stated that Afghanistan must, “increase its efforts to realise the vision of gender equality. Gender-responsive development will contribute to the reconstruction of the country, to economic growth, and poverty reduction.”

While these statements have been made in response to the increasing

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42 ibid 20  
43 ibid page 24  
Date Created: 8th March 2005
reality that the human rights situation has changed very little for women in Afghanistan, they have achieved very little.\textsuperscript{45}

The future of women’s human rights in Afghanistan is dependant on the goal of a stable prosperous society without the current security concerns and constant threats to daily life. As former US Ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald Neuman has pointed out ultimately what people want is to see improvement in their day-to-day life, “Do I have a school, a clinic or a road paved in my village? If I don’t then all the rest of the schools and clinics and roads don’t matter.”\textsuperscript{46} As The Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACEBAR) continually reports, without a strong international commitment to such capacity building, “the consolidating of peace will remain an illusion.”\textsuperscript{47}

Activists such as RAWA have frequently linked the lack of real change in Afghanistan to the lack of successful implementation of democracy. Currently there can be seen in Afghanistan the institution of formal democratic processes. There is a constitution, a directly elected president and legislature. Elections have been held in a relatively peaceful manner, moderate parliamentarians have won seats and women hold the 68 seats in parliament reserved for them.\textsuperscript{48} On the other hand serious questions have been raised about the effectiveness of these markers of progress. Voter turnout is low and particularly worrying is the estimated over 125 war lords who have

\textsuperscript{46} ibid pg 3464
\textsuperscript{48} Hegland C (2005) ‘It’s Great to be a Warlord in Afghanistan’ National Journal; Nov 5, 2005; pg. 3464
secured legitimacy through winning seats.\textsuperscript{49} Drug trafficking is frequently named as the major destabilising force.\textsuperscript{50} Finally there is the dependence on America and allies to provide continued presence to ensure a tenuous security.

These negative influences on the process impact on the overall picture of daily life in Afghanistan for women. In a 2003 conference in Afghanistan, Larry Sampler, former head of the UN assistance mission in Afghanistan, put it succinctly, “it doesn’t much matter if the glass is half full or half empty because it is perched on a buffet table on the Titanic”\textsuperscript{51}. Outspoken Afgan MP, Malalai Joya, has expressed similar sentiments in her statement "How can a country improve when 50% of its population are silenced? It is like a bird with only one wing!"\textsuperscript{52} It is important to reinforce here that the silencing of women is not just occurring in public. Many of the current difficulties mentioned earlier of forced marriage and domestic violence that affect women at the private level are the most rampant, and the hardest to change. Thus focussing on government policy, or religious or cultural practices is unhelpful. It is more accurate to view the situation for women as the result of the intersection of an insecure country with an ineffective government that can do little to change the manipulation of the Islamic faith to justify the patriarchal practices of the individuals and families within the society.

\textsuperscript{49} ibid pg 3464.
\textsuperscript{51} Hegland C (2005) ‘It’s Great to be a Warlord in Afghanistan’ pg. 3464
\textsuperscript{52} Malalai, Joya (2006) “Afghan MP says she will not be silenced” January 27, 2006 Available at: http://www.malalaijoya.com/index1024.htm Date Accessed: 12.5.2007
RAWA’s response to the ongoing abuse of women not only involves their daily activities, but also a process of framing an understanding of rights and democracy for Afghanistan. This is in direct response to the ongoing abuses of women mentioned in the previous section. This frame can be understood as part of a broad trend of advocacy that seeks to shape moral discourse and define appropriate social behaviour. The ability of groups to effect political change is based on the three tactics of information, persuasion and moral pressure. The sharing of information operates as the first step in the process of awareness-raising, particularly at an international level. The aim is to dictate the background understanding for events and issues. This can be seen quite clearly in RAWA’s website and its news section which reports on current events in Afghanistan, particularly cases of abuse against women. Also, in speeches given internationally by RAWA members there is a desire to share the reality of life in Afghanistan to increase international awareness. At a domestic level the RAWA publication, Payaam els Zaan (“Women Awake”), and the distribution of leaflets at RAWA events, serve to disseminate knowledge about current political events and an understanding of rights, to the women of Afghanistan.

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57 Sohaila (2007) Talk on RAWA at Sydney University
Persuasion and moral pressure is evidenced in almost all of the public communication from RAWA - from speeches, to press releases to their website. They are quite clear in their construction of fundamentalism as the enemy of humanity and that to defeat it “We need the solidarity and support of all people around the world.”\textsuperscript{59} Beyond simple awareness and information, the aim of groups deploying a framing process is to “shape the world according to their beliefs.”\textsuperscript{60} Standards are developed and promoted including “shared expectations of appropriate behaviour.”\textsuperscript{61} The standards of behaviour expected by RAWA are perfectly clear. They see women’s equality and democracy as the best ways to organise society. They not only actively promote this through their websites, protests and publications, but also through their personal actions. RAWA members operate as role models for the women and girls they encounter. Cheryl Bernard suggests that “I decided to be just like her” is a common reaction of Afghan women when they receive RAWA support.\textsuperscript{62} There is also the fact that married RAWA members always, as a necessity, have a supportive husband and thus have quite unique marriages compared to the norm of submissive wives and overbearing husbands in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{63} They are strong in their belief that this is key part of their influence, even if it is somewhat slow and limited in its impact\textsuperscript{64}. Especially in the long-term project of attitude change, it is individuals and families who need to see different patterns of behaviour modelled in order for it to have an

\textsuperscript{60} Kangram, Sanjeev, Riker, James and Sikkink Kathryn(2002) “From Santiago to Seattle: Transnational Advocacy Groups Restructuring World Politics” pg 11
\textsuperscript{61} ibid, page 14
\textsuperscript{62} Bernard, Cheryl (2002) Veiled Courage pg 49
\textsuperscript{63} ibid
\textsuperscript{64} ibid
impact. This is a clear translation of the universalist idea of modelling moral behaviour.\textsuperscript{65}

The moral pressure from RAWA operates at three distinct levels. The first level that can be seen is the condemnation of the Karzai government and the accusations of corruption and harbouring of warlords. RAWA is quite open in its belief that “an administration, legislature and judiciary under the domination of the criminals and traitors, will never do any good for our bereaved people.”\textsuperscript{66} RAWA does not shy away from giving specific examples either. In a 2005 interview on Radio National, member Ameena Shams names several, “Sayyaf: He is a commander, and he was the leader of a faction, he expects the most important post in the judiciary of Afghanistan, and he is one of the advisers of president Karzai. And another one (is) Dostum, he has a key post in the defense ministry of Afghanistan.”\textsuperscript{67} This ‘naming and shaming’ approach is the only real means RAWA has of pressuring the government, as their lack of official status as an organisation within Afghanistan means their formal influence is non-existent. The approach of RAWA is to, instead, make public any potentially damaging information towards the government and to expose the fundamentalist presence in the parliament.

The second level of pressure is the engagement with the international community for support - both financial and moral. RAWA makes it quite clear that it receives no formal support from any individual government or the UN, so is reliant on wider society for donations. The photos of orphanages and schools serve as inspiration for

what RAWA can achieve with that help. It also proudly displays the links to organizations around the world that support them. Finally there are the pages of poems expressing solidarity with RAWA.\textsuperscript{68} These operate to link the plight of women in Afghanistan to the international arena, and create a perception that this is something everyone needs to be concerned about.

The third level of pressure is a more complex and nuanced one to understand. In order to realise a democratic Afghanistan that respects women’s rights, broad social change is needed, and this only occurs when individuals, families and communities are persuaded that change is required. The most visible way this occurs is in RAWA’s \textit{Watan} schools in Pakistan-several of which accept boys and girls. Here children observe their RAWA teachers, and absorb the messages of equality as they undertake their lessons and also become aware of RAWA’s activities. Boys particularly benefit from the broad subjects and being given a secular alternative to the madrassas.\textsuperscript{69} Given that these have been operating for over 27 years now, many former students are members or supporters, and also have, often by pure necessity due to the many restrictions on women, also engaged their families in RAWA.\textsuperscript{70}

Often women are drawn in to RAWA through literacy programs. Once they begin lessons they also begin discussing their home life, the status of women and their personal political views. RAWA members find that this is a necessary first step in dealing with students who have often experienced so much trauma and upheaval.\textsuperscript{71}

Gradually as the conversations continue, as the women’s literacy level improves so

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\item \textsuperscript{68} RAWA(2007) “Poems” www.rawa.org/poetry Accessed 27.7.2007
\item \textsuperscript{69} Bernard, Cheryl (2002) \textit{Veiled Courage} pg 51
\item \textsuperscript{70} ibid pg 45
\item \textsuperscript{71} Brodsky Anne (2003) \textit{With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan}. Routledge, New York pg 49
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does their confidence. They begin to develop a trust and respect for RAWA, and more importantly for themselves and their rights - both in public and private. The end result is support for RAWA, ranging from simply not divulging activities to passing information and housing members, right through to active membership.

RAWA’s history, goals and principles can be viewed as existing within a process that seeks to frame women’s rights in Afghanistan using a universalist discourse. This operates on several levels involving the international community, pressure on the Karzai government and long-term persuasion of individuals and families. It is important to acknowledge the uniqueness and independence of the organisation in order to situate them in post-Taliban Afghanistan. RAWA’s goals and tactics suggest that its principles operate as a locally developed universalism.

72 ibid, pg 50
CHAPTER TWO

RAWA’s National Context: The Islamic Construction of Gender within Afghan Culture

This chapter seeks to examine RAWA’s work within the context of national understandings of gender within Islam. Acknowledging the reality that the religion has distinct strands and variations across many nations and cultures, the first section of the chapter will discuss the way gender is considered in Islam and also in Afghanistan. The second section will examine the way that these understandings of gender have contributed to RAWA’s nationalistic Islamic feminism. What becomes clear is that the predominant fundamentalist understandings of Islam in Afghanistan operate as a device through which long-established cultural practices subjugating and abusing women, can be justified. At the same time, this is the local environment that RAWA operates in and uses to make claims of authenticity.

Understanding of the role of women in Islam

This first section will examine how the human rights violations of women in Afghanistan belong in a broader picture of understanding the role of women within the Islamic faith. The Islamic response to universal rights operates as a form of relativism, which seeks to particularise the experience of Muslims within their faith. It is important here to note that the Islamic religion is not being conflated with culture in this analysis - what is being examined is the way in which Islam is used in Afghanistan to govern gender relations. Many different interpretations can be seen of
the religion, including legal, socio-cultural and feminist ones, that respond to conservative approaches. It is important to stress here the findings of Catherine Polisi’s study of the texts of the Hindu and Islamic faiths to show that there is not necessarily anything inherent in religion to suggest a predisposition to rights abuses. What is significant is the way Islam has manifested itself in many nations and cultures and how its practice has varied. For instance, the majority of people in Afghanistan are Sunni Muslim, which has a particularly orthodox, conservative bent. It is important to view Islam as one of several central factors, and not the sole one, determining the status of women in Afghanistan.

Sunni Muslims represent approximately 84% of the Afghanistan population. This means that a literal interpretation of the Holy Koran, and the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet), as absolute truth are predominant within the tribes in Afghanistan. In terms of the modern history of Afghanistan, the fundamentalist Sunni Wahabi sect, founded by Saudi Arabian theologian IbnWahab, is a major influence on the understanding of Islam. It was Wahabi scholars who trained the Taliban in the madrassas of Pakistan. It is from this sect that understandings of the importance of absolute obedience to religious authority, and punishment for even slight deviation came.

This interpretation has become pervasive, and has certainly not disappeared with the end of the Taliban’s formal period in power. This focus on punishment appeals to many in Afghanistan who see a weak government failing to address their particular

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concerns with justice and tribal disputes. As RAWA member Sohaila states, “They see the Taliban doing something, addressing their problem, so they go to them not the government.”

At the centre of the process of the Islamic governing of gender relations in Afghanistan is the Koran, as it operates, literally, as the divine revelations of the way life should be lived for Muslims. Many passages can be interpreted as discussing women, their roles and rights. What is uncovered through these passages is a sense of women as operating in a separate, and in fact, secondary, place in society. Veiling, polygamy, restrictions on marriage and divorce are all practices that have found justification within the Koran. Perhaps the most well known, and the one that has had most consequences, is the passage concerning the covering of the prophet Muhammad’s wives, “If you ask his wives for anything, speak to them from behind a curtain. This is purer for your hearts and their hearts.” There is quite a different, less stringent requirement for other women, “Tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent.” These passages have been used to enforce veiling of women in Afghanistan, and more importantly general restrictions on their participation in public life.

Moving beyond specific passages in the Koran and the other holy text, the Hadith, there is the Islamic concept of purdah, or women’s seclusion, through dress, but also

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79 Sohaila (2007) Talk on RAWA for Sydney University Student Representative Council Women’s Collective delivered at Sydney University 26th July 2007
83 ibid, pg 21
in terms of public participation and equal rights.\(^{84}\) Purdah has fully entrenched itself in Afghanistan, and women have long found their lives severely constrained, even prior to the Taliban period by the official decrees concerning it.\(^{85}\) Purdah has been deployed within Afghanistan so forcefully because tribal beliefs about the weakness of women, and the resulting incapacity to form part of public life, have always existed, even in pre-Islamic Afghanistan.\(^{86}\) The Islamic term purdah simply reinforces and justifies the practice. What purdah suggests about Islam, and about its relationship with Afghan society, is that Islam reinforces women as the symbols of the morality and virtue of their family and tribe. Their behaviour is so strictly governed because it is so integral to the perceived honour of the community.\(^{87}\)

Another way Islam operates as the justification of the patriarchal construction of gender in Afghanistan is the use of historical women as symbols. Two incredibly significant women used as models and symbols of feminine virtue within Islam are the prophet’s fourth wife, Aisha, and his eldest daughter Fatima. Much of Islamic history, including the schism between the Sunni and Shiite sects, is in fact attributed to the splitting of allegiances between these women following the prophet’s death. While some point to Fatima’s position as a daughter, rather than son, of the prophet, as an indicator of an equal status that exists for women within Islam, others have a different interpretation.\(^{88}\) The process of ‘Fatima becoming Fatima’ is achieved through the guidance of and relationship to men - as a daughter, wife, mother, and

\(^{84}\) Goodwin, Jan (1994) *Price of Honour* Little, Brown and Company, Toronto pg 3
member of the community. This operates as a message for all Islamic women, and highlights the patriarchal underpinnings of the religion. Furthermore the virtues attributed to her of purity, suffering and obedience make her figurehead role in the religion not a positive one, but one that reinforces the apparent fragility of women. What becomes apparent is that mainstream Islamic thinkers can use specific symbols and figures to reinforce conformity rather than challenge it.  

The figure of Aisha has particular significance for the understandings of womanhood in Afghanistan, as a predominantly Sunni Muslim nation. To Sunni Muslims she is a “formidable teacher of Islam” and a brave fighter. She in fact led a group of her tribe into battle during a dispute with Fatima’s husband, Ali over succession following the prophet’s death. Hundreds were killed and this had a profound effect on the acceptance of women in public life and the Hadith that “No people who place a woman over their affairs will prosper” was used to thoroughly damage Aisha’s reputation. Following the defeat, she made peace with Ali, and withdrew altogether from public life. While her status as a ‘Mother of believers’ made her a religious authority today she is used as an example of the consequences of women meddling too much in public life. This only reinforces the already patriarchal make up of Afghan tribal society and its ability to manipulate constructions of gender. The regulation of women’s behaviour, as a key to the virtue of the community as a whole can be seen in pre-Islamic Islam. For instance, the work of ancient Persian poet Muslihuddin Sa’di instructs men on obligations, “If a woman visits the market you

89 Ibid
90 Brooks, Geraldine (2005) Nine Parts of Desire pg 77
91 Brooks, Geraldine (1995) Nine Parts of Desire pg 89
92 ibid
beat her, otherwise you stay home like a woman.” Here can be seen both the connection between gender and honour, and also the secondary status of women as it is a term used to insult a man.

Many scholars have attempted to respond to these negative constructions of women by seeking to discredit them and find a more ‘authentic’ and liberal interpretation of Islam and the position of women. Much of the focus is on Shari’a law, as it has had influence in many Islamic countries (including Afghanistan) in the daily lives of women. Others, and particularly western writers, have focussed not on the law but instead on documenting society’s many restrictions and the abuses suffered by women due to Islam. Jan Goodwin’s *Price of Honour* is one such example. In it Afghan women are described as “the pawns of men in the Islamisation process.” The clear aim of the liberal response to Islam is to locate what is problematic with the conservative Islamic discourse on gender, and to reconcile Islam with universalistic rights discourse. For instance, Ann Elizabeth Mayer makes the statement that Islam is not monolithic and is, “susceptible to interpretations that can and do create conflicts between religious doctrine and human right norms or that reconcile the two.” While Islam has been manipulated in order to justify the subjugation and abuse of Afghan women, this process has in fact galvanised this segment of the community against these practices.

While valuable as attempts at showing Islam as mutable, what is left out in the prevailing legalistic and cultural examinations of gender in Islam is the possibility for

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96 Goodwin, Jan (1994) *Price of Honor* pg 77
an active role for Islamic women. They are largely viewed as passive victims of circumstances and few scholars acknowledge Islamic women’s rights activists. The approach and framing of this issue are very important, especially when painting women as victims leads to the dangerous conclusion that to be ‘for’ Islam you must be ‘against’ human rights. Islamic women, in this understanding, have a clear role in the process in the defining of tradition, culture and identity. This role cannot be taken as an absolute given, as empirically the male interpretation of Islam is predominant. That said, it is vital to at least concede the role of women in some of the interpretations of Islam if RAWA’s existence and significance as female Islamic activists is to be adequately explained.

Human rights activists have a potentially large role in removing the barriers that cultural specificities and ‘rites’ often create in establishing claims to universal human rights. It has been argued that women’s human rights activists show human rights to be a function of individual rights as well as social rites and that, “they work toward recognising universal rights in their home societies by changing the formal and informal practices of those societies.” There is a definite danger in discussing a homogenous Islamic ‘culture’ that precludes change, and precludes differing responses. It does little to alter the perception that what it means to live a female human life is different from what it means to live a male human life and devalues the female experience. It ignores the interactions between Islam and cultural and

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99 Ibid
102 Ibid
historical factors and instead, “gives Islamic religious ideology a pre- eminent position in the Islamic world, while regional, cultural and neo-colonial differences are ignored.”

Within the discussion of gender in Islam ultimately it is clear that there is an issue of flexibility. Furthermore, a culture that systematically renders women invisible may produce a group like RAWA who hold a liberal-feminist perspective in an Islamic country. Also, this group will accept elements of this culture it finds distasteful in order to achieve its goals. For instance many RAWA interviewees laughingly refer to the ‘disgusting’ burqa as a saviour due to its keeping identities and specific activities of members hidden. This is part of the development of a local response to Islam and the situation of women in Islamic countries.

RAWA’s Islamic Feminism

This section will examine the feminist interpretation of Islam, and RAWA as an example of a rejectionist Islamic feminism that has developed in response to the situation of women in Afghanistan. Islamic feminism seeks to rectify the problem of the lack of acknowledgement of activism and the role of women in religious discourse, even within liberal interpretations of Islam. There have developed a range of perspectives on this from fundamentalist endorsement of rights abuses as sanctioned within Islam and direct opposition to feminism, to reformists who seek to

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104 Bernard, Carol (2002) Veiled courage: inside the Afghan women’s resistance Milsons Point, NSW: Random House pg 43
incorporate feminism into Islam, and rejectionists who call for complete rejection of Islam as the only solution.\textsuperscript{105}

The reformists point to the very early days of Islam and its initial role removing some of the disabilities and subjugation for the women of pre-Islamic Arabia as vindication for the compatibility of women’s rights with Islam.\textsuperscript{106} According to reformists, the promotion of harmony within family and just treatment as well as specific practices such as divorce were all developed in the Middle East as a direct result of Islam\textsuperscript{107}. The implication is that through successive generations the true meaning and intention of the religion has been lost. The solution to the violation of rights is therefore to promote moderate interpretations, and encourage female Islamic scholarship. The reformist notion of women having a place in Islamic scholarship, or the teaching of the religion is a particular taboo. While the prophet never issued any decrees forbidding it, and in fact encouraged women attending Mosque and joining in prayers, the idea of leadership in the Islamic community was never considered a viable option for women, aside from the Prophet’s wives and revered daughter Fatima.\textsuperscript{108} Thus the feminist discussion of the possibilities of Islamic scholarship uses terminology of reform and modernity, and is not based on the conventional understandings. This further highlights the fact that the discussion of gender in Islam cannot be separated from the wider societal context.

\textsuperscript{105} Mojab, Shahrzad (2001) “Theorising the Politics of Islamic Feminism” Feminist Review, No 69, Winter 2001 pg130
The rejectionist form of Islamic feminism seeks not to reform but to radically alter society by highlighting the ways in which Islam has been used in Islamic countries to sanction the subjugation and abuse of women. Groups such as RAWA seek to promote secular notions of democracy and rights. The separation of religion and state is seen as key priority because the politicised religion enables the patriarchal systems of Islam greater power.\(^{109}\) Somalian born Hirsi Ali is a prominent rejectionist who has gained a global celebrity status due to her book *Infidel* detailing her experiences as an Islamic woman with genital mutilation, forced marriage and violence. Her statement that, “the Koran is a man-made brutal doctrine of death whose time has long passed” exemplifies the rejectionist stance.\(^{110}\) RAWA’s position that Islam in Afghanistan is now, “a retrogressive tool in the hands of fanatics” echoes the rejectionist argument. It is a less extreme statement than Ali’s, and is in keeping with their philosophy that it is the influence of politicised Islam, that they are struggling against, not the entire faith.\(^{111}\)

It is important to note Islamic feminism is inextricably linked with modernist interpretations of Islam, particularly in Afghanistan.\(^{112}\) As suggested previously gender constructions hold enormous symbolic power in Islamic communities. This has particular manifestations when discussing Islamic Feminism as a response to politicised Islam. Valentine Moghdam describes it succinctly; “The unveiled, public woman has signified modernity, progress and development, while the veiled

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\(^{109}\) ibid


\(^{112}\) Badran, Margot (2001) “Understanding Islam, Isalmism and Islamic Feminism” *Journal of Women’s History* Vol.13 No.1 (Spring) pg 47
domesticated woman has symbolised the search for authenticity, cultural revival and reproduction of the group.”¹¹³ This historical struggle has enormous significance for Afghanistan, and therefore for RAWA. Their rejectionist Islamic feminist view has developed to counter the way the conservative, patriarchal interpretations of Islam have been used within their society as a foundation for the subjugation and abuse of women. Thus this discussion of Islamic scholarship has developed from a modernist perspective of reform.

The situation for women in Afghanistan is a result of a complex interaction between political, personal and historical circumstances and cannot easily be attributed entirely to the religious or cultural context. As Goodwin puts it, “The severe restrictions placed on women by the Islamist movement, such as confinement or complete veiling, have no basis in the Koran or the teachings of the prophet, but are being stressed because of the role women play in the Muslim world.”¹¹⁴ Thus the present situation for women in Afghanistan can be viewed as a complex and unbelievably difficult one where history, policies, tradition and attitude have combined to completely disadvantage them. It is this complex interaction that forms the national context for the work of RAWA.


¹¹⁴ Goodwin, Jan (1994) Price of Honour pg 3
CHAPTER THREE

RAWA and the application of rights: Universalism versus Relativism

This chapter seeks to analyse the universalist human rights discourse and RAWA’s place in it. RAWA’s philosophical basis comes from universalist notions of human rights, a concept considered ethnocentric by cultural relativists. This debate is significant for the analysis of RAWA, specifically in relation to the difficulty of turning the theory and moral philosophy of human rights into practical reality. This process is to be discussed in three sections, the first discussing the assumptions of universalism and the development of relativism as a response to it. The second section will analyse the possibility of adding culture to universalism. The third section will examine how RAWA operates as an example of this so it can be viewed as representative of a practical ‘indigenisation’ of rights.

Universalism and the relativist response

The universalist versus cultural relativist debate takes up an enormous amount of the body of work concerning human rights theory. The central question raised is the existence of universal human rights beyond the western world. Proponents of universalism make the simple statement that if one is human then one has human rights, therefore all rights are universal. This basic tenet is espoused definitively in Jack Donnelly’s work Universal human rights in Theory and Practice. Donnelly states that, “Human Rights are equal rights: one either is or is not a human being, and therefore has the same human rights as everyone else”, regardless of your origins or
even your actions. Beginning from this point of view is one particular way RAWA has chosen to begin framing their stance in order to encourage seeing women not purely as a gender but as people who deserve just treatment.

There is disagreement among universalist scholars over the appropriateness of simple universal equality in framing the discussion surrounding rights. The difficulty with an equating of rights with equality is that it discounts the prospect that different people suffer from different infringements on their liberties and may need specific or restorative rights to address this. Richard Falk proposes an alternative understanding of universalism that allows for the recognition of difference. Falk believes that, “A true universality would acknowledge significant difference as well as sameness” if it were to ensure true equality and be a constructive principle for world order. This construction of universalism has particular resonance for RAWA, which is advocating women’s equality but also asserting the need for a redressing of specific rights violations that women face. Significantly, this recognition of difference acknowledges the need for locally based change, which eliminates the claim that these rights and norms are “part of a cultural onslaught emanating from ‘elsewhere’ and can therefore be ignored.”

Cultural relativism has developed as a critique of universalism and its western origins. The central assumption of cultural relativism is that culture is so integral to human

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existence that it precludes the possibility of rights applying universally. The response of cultural relativists to universalism is to argue for the existence of firm cultural structures, not universal ones mediating human experience. This, in essence, asserts the primacy of culture. The central relativist position on rights is that their historical grounding in western liberal democracy means demands for other cultures to adopt these standards when their history has been so different that it is a form of ethnocentrism.

The value of relativism is that it challenges assumptions of universality, and seeks more contextualised understandings. Alison Renteln asserts that this argument has enormous value in increasing awareness of the need to look beyond western constructs to understand how rights work. According to Renteln, “the most valuable feature of cultural relativism was, and still is, its ability to challenge the presumed universality of standards which actually belong only to one culture.” The importance of culture in understanding the work of RAWA is clear. They operate in a very specific framework as women in Afghanistan, and their major goal is the achievement of better circumstances specifically for women in Afghanistan.

A philosophical objection to the universality of rights raised by relativism is their individualistic nature. Rights, particularly first and second generation, carry with them an assumption that an individual is to be left alone, with no outside interference. This understanding clashes with community and communitarian notions of “ideologies and

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119 Hartung, Frank 1954 "Cultural Relativity and Moral Judgements" in Philosophy of Science 21: 118-126
121 Renteln, A (1990)”Relativism Revisited” in, International Human rights versus Relativism SAGE publications, California pg 65
cultures where society is conceived of as far more than the sum of its individual members.”122 Rights for women are particularly contentious because the freedom of an individual woman within a marriage, family or wider society comes into direct conflict with perceptions that “behaviour of womenfolk is central to society’s perception of its honour.”123 This can be interpreted as somewhat of a false opposition because civil and political rights for individuals in fact protect groups and social and economic rights for groups protect individuals within them.124

Discussing universal human rights, and even Islamic applications of these rights has a further fraught difficulty in Afghanistan due to its status as one of the poorest countries. There is an argument that human rights are simply too costly for developing countries while nation building and economic development are underway. More hardline, authoritarian policies are the more proficient way of improving a country, and rights are a luxury that comes later.125 Of course counter to this claim is the belief that rights are an essential part of the development process, and that the links between rights and democracy provide the best prospects for a nation’s stable future.126 Ultimately, the key question that cultural relativism raises is, ‘Is it empirically true that non-western cultures have an inherent intolerance to rights?’ A positive answer leads to the extreme conclusion that, “the suggestion by any white, middle class feminist that women and girls in cultures other than our own are disadvantaged or

123 ibid
124 ibid
125 ibid
oppressed by elements of their own cultures amounted to offensive cultural imperialism.”

A major refutation to relativism is the analysis of the agent of the claim to rights, or to exemption from them. There is much to gain by diminishing the importance of human rights. Looking at the Taliban in Afghanistan, we can see that their particular policies have a clear agenda of keeping half their population invisible and silent. Such an isolationist regime as the Taliban is always going to refuse the scrutiny that comes with endorsing human rights. Furthermore, there is a concerted effort being made here to use culture to justify their regime and achieve legitimacy. While the Taliban may claim Islam is a separate entity that carries its own particular ideas of rights and responsibilities, they do not have complete ownership over interpreting Islam and its relationship with human rights. Many Islamic theologians, and many Afghans, consider the Taliban interpretation to be incorrect. In defining culture it is therefore inaccurate, and perhaps even condescending to accept any one interpretation as authentic and above scrutiny. Who is making the claim of cultural specificity and the purpose behind the claim are just as significant, if not more so, than the claim itself.

The relativist argument also becomes problematic empirically when it is considered that the majority of countries in the world have been involved in drafting and signing various international agreements, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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While, as will be seen later, this does not mean an equal commitment to their implementation it is an indication of broad support for the principles. These principles come from a long tradition of theory on the inherent equality and rights of man (and it has traditionally been the term man rather than people). International human rights laws such as the UDHR operate as standards of behaviour of states towards its citizens. In considering whether or not these standards of behaviour require a specific cultural justification it is important to allow for the possibility that there is no set of all encompassing Western principles determining human rights. There is instead perhaps an “overlapping consensus.”

The potential of this ‘overlapping consensus’ of equal worth in all humans underpins many of the obligations set out in UDHR. More recently other documents including The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have also operated to regulate behaviour between citizens in the private realm, through establishing a ‘duty to protect’ for states. This is a particularly important development in the field of gender, where it has long been acknowledged that the majority of abuses against women take place hidden from view within families and personal relationships, and that culture is deployed as a justification for this.

The difficulty with the separate universalist and cultural relativist claims is that they seem to preclude the fluidity of culture and of perceptions surrounding rights and

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often deny agency to those suffering from rights abuses. This makes it doubtful whether either approach can explain the existence and significance of RAWA- a Muslim Women’s group which operates under universalist principles but with the distinct constraints of Afghan culture. RAWA shows that culture is not a homogenous, immovable monolith. As Thuror states, “Culture is constantly evolving in any living society, responding to both internal and external stimuli, and there is much in every culture that societies quite naturally outgrow and reject.”

Acknowledging cultural fluidity means a distinction is made between the conceptualisation of rights, and the actual practice of them. Considering the translation of rights theory into practice allows an understanding of rights on a different level from the dichotomous construction of universality and relativism. What is left out with either emphasis is an acknowledgement that regardless of universal standards that have been set, in so many varying cultures rights are not consistently and actively realised in the daily lives of people, and women in particular.

The possibility that rights are universal should not be conflated with the fact that there are enormous disparities between cultures in terms of how they should be practised. The defining of cultural relativism and universalism leads to a perception that the two paradigms are diametrically opposed. This is somewhat of a false dichotomy however. Respect for cultural heritage, and differing interpretations of rights is not precluded within universalism. The difficult element within this is the extent to which this happens. Currently 77 out of the 185 signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women have put forward reservation to parts

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134 Tharoor, Shashi (1999) “Are Human Rights Universal?” pg 1
of the treaty.136 These reservations all seek to particularise this universal document within individual nations and cultures. For instance Saudi Arabia makes the reservation that, “In case of contradiction between any term of the Convention and the norms of Islamic law, the Kingdom is not under obligation to observe the contradictory terms of the Convention.”137 Thus it cannot be taken as given that a signature to a universal document equals a full acceptance of universality.

There is clearly a more complex situation occurring around rights than ‘west versus the rest’. Peter Baehr supports this thinking and states, “The fact that human rights are being violated all over the world is not an argument against universalism of standards. It only tells us something about deficiencies in overseeing these standards.” 138 This framing of the debate acknowledges the possibility of separating the ideas of rights from the actual practice of them. This is useful because it attempts to ensure that the moral imperative of rights is not reduced simply because one culture is currently undertaking oppressive practices.

Adding culture to rights and rights to culture

This third section will examine adding culture to rights (and vice versa) as a response to the problem of discrepancy in both theory and practice, and how RAWA is representative of this response. There are two key elements to this process. Firstly there is the attempt at resolving, or moving beyond the universalist/relativist distinction in human rights theory. This is the acknowledgement of the significance of

137 ibid
138 Baehr Peter (2001) “Universalism Versus Cultural Relativism” pg18
culture, and the need for locally based conceptualisations of rights. Secondly there is the obvious need for rights to be embedded within cultures and cultural practice to ensure the theory becomes reality.

Theoretically, the process of adding culture to rights acknowledges both the universality of rights and the significance of culture. Universality of rights, in this sense, does not necessarily mean uniformity. There will always be the inevitable philosophical, cultural and religious divisions between various societies. However, it can be considered sufficient that rights reflect common universal humanity within these different societies, without fundamentally excluding any human being. Thus what takes place when rights are added to culture is an acknowledgment of, “the need to justify universality within a framework that acknowledges the descriptive truth of cultural pluralism.” At the same time, “the cultural contingency of values as a descriptive claim does not undermine the normative claim that human rights are, or should be, universal.” By seeking to embrace, rather than alienate culture the theoretical discussion is brought back to the essential aim of rights, which is the protection of freedom. This acknowledges that, “where coercion exists, rights are violated, and these violations must be condemned whatever the traditional justification. So it is not culture that is the test, it is coercion.” This is the distinction between relativism and the process of combining rights and culture: relativism ends at distilling rights from their context and does not seek to find ways in which they can co-exist.

139 Tharoor, Shashi (1999) “Are Human Rights Universal?” pg 1
140 ibid
142 ibid pg 58
143 Tharoor, Shashi (1999) “Are Human Rights Universal?” pg 1
Ultimately the combining of culture and rights allows for a base line of acceptability for culture within universalism, while not sanctioning gross and systematic rights abuses. It is a difficult balancing act, and its practical application will vary enormously. One example of the process is Martha Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach. The capabilities approach is centred on stripping away the value laden terminology of rights to focus on what is required for humans to live lives that enables them to fulfil their potential. In Bangladesh this was represented by the Bangladeshi Literacy Project - an organisation that identified illiteracy as an enormous barrier in women’s lives. Small groups of women were taught basic literacy, and then trained to teach others. Thus the outside intervention was minimal, and the ‘right’ to literacy was locally owned.

The idea of capability and locally grounded response has enormous relevance for understanding how RAWA operates as a case of the combining of culture and rights, as their focus on combining social service with political agenda has developed in order to develop the capability of women to participate and change their society. The aim of adding culture to rights has particular resonance to RAWA as it has potential to put women at the centre of research and also to place women’s experiences in appropriate cultural context. Thus groups such as RAWA have the project of ensuring local acceptance and application of rights. Their challenge is to “work towards the ‘indigenization’ of the notion of women’s rights as human rights.”

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145 Ibid pg 48
147 Franck, Thomas (2001) “Are Human Rights Universal” pg 191
The approach of adding culture to rights is not without criticism. Firstly allowing for the possibility that western philosophy does not have complete ownership over the moral imperative of rights does not remove the predominance of it. As Evan Charney states, “the project of attempting to find resources within a given cultural tradition, no matter how marginal, to guide that tradition to support basic human rights, does not necessarily free one from the charge of the ‘hegemony’ of Western liberalism.”

Secondly, simply allowing for the fact that some non-western cultures hold values that could support equal rights for people of varying gender, religious, racial backgrounds does not preclude the existence of entire cultures where this may be completely non-existent. These are not insurmountable difficulties however. There are indeed examples of rights transcending the specifics of culture, such as the appeal to common humanity of the students at Tiananmen Square. Questioning the success of this simply gives greater imperative for rights and culture to be conceptualised in a more sophisticated manner as a relationship, not two dichotomous terms.

**RAWA as Locally Grounded Universalism**

This next section will examine the understanding of RAWA’s message of, “peace, freedom, democracy and women’s rights.” These principles are all too easily dismissed as not belonging authentically to RAWA, but instead belonging elsewhere, specifically western feminism. While some examples of inspiration can be attributed to the support from the west it is important to also see that it was the intellectual and

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149 ibid 846
150 ibid pg 844
activist movement within Afghanistan in the 1970s that produced Meena who shaped, and continues to posthumously shape today, the principles of the organisation.

The fact that RAWA’s principles of social justice and rights are part of the universalist paradigm brings forth the question of the true universality of universalism. On the one hand this universalism is vindicated by the fact that an Afghan organisation, and particularly a women’s organisation can articulate similar sentiments of modelling ethics and justice as those as of universalists who firmly state that humans should, “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” On the other hand, those with a relativist background rightly point to the western dominance within the universalist tradition to suggest that the origins and influences on the framing of an organisation’s principles are worth considering before claims of universalism are made.

The universalist principles in RAWA are easy to see. From the very basic notion of gender equality, and the potential it has for transformation of society through to the interconnections it makes between basic rights to life and liberty and the social and economic rights to earn income and participate in public life can all be found in the universalist tradition. The idea of social justice is firmly embedded within RAWA. Their literacy programs, clinics, orphanages and schools show that RAWA’s principles extend to service to those less fortunate. A volunteer at one of RAWA’s orphanages reports on their website about how these children are being educated, “to

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believe in the value and dignity of every human being, to seek knowledge and develop skills, to find happiness in helping and sharing with others.” 154

The relativist account of RAWA’s relationship with the west focuses purely on the positioning of western hegemony against a small group in impoverished Afghanistan. The conclusion that is reached is that the RAWA simply operates as a parrot of these bigger organizations, due to its financial dependence. 155 Author and academic Eve Ensler of the Feminist Majority is pointed to as an example of the manipulation of RAWA. A 2002 performance of her play “Vagina Monologues” saw Oprah Winfrey recite a poem “Under the Burqa” and at its conclusion she removed the burqa of a RAWA member named Zoya. 156 For relativists, such as former Iranian representative to the UN Said Rajaie-Khorassani, participation in such events only further confirms the belief that universal rights are purely “a secular understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition.” 157 The extrapolation is that universalism is not truly universal but western.

There are several indicators that this is not an entirely accurate assessment. It is somewhat paradoxical but, by being so locally grounded, RAWA has developed not a western bias but instead a distinctive translation of universal ideas. A key indicator for this is that RAWA, as an organisation is deeply rooted in the opposition that existed in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. As Cheryl Bernard states, “It was almost


156 Ibid pg30

inevitable, in Afghanistan, that university students became radicalised. The county’s poverty was so extreme, social conditions were so desperate, the political system was so patently corrupt, and the elites were so manifestly advantaged." It was a particularly opportune time for women to step forward into social activism in Afghanistan because as the Soviet occupation dragged on, the middle class and intellectual men driving the resistance were increasingly jailed, drafted into the army or exiled. It was during this period that RAWA’s potential “as the voice of the people’s conscience” was discovered. Schoolgirls and widows ‘saying poetry’ against the rival Khalq and Parcham parties was a unique and attention grabbing tool.

RAWA’s role in the resistance was not uncontested. It was thought impossible that a political women’s organisation could exist independently of the guidance and direction of men. Particularly controversial was Meena’s marriage to socialist Faiz Ahmad. It was widely assumed that RAWA was simply auxiliary to his work. This is exactly the same problem RAWA encounters when its relationship with the west is analysed. The reality of an independent women’s political organisation is simply seen as too far out of left field to have developed without outside assistance. The issue of RAWA’s independence extends beyond Afghanistan to the international arena, where the support of western feminist organisations is interpreted as ownership, rather than partnership.

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159 ibid pg 20
160 ibid pg 20
161 Brodsky Anne (2003)*With All Our Strength* pg 28
162 Bernard, Cheryl (2002) *Veiled courage* pg 17
A second key indicator of a unique RAWA framing of universal rights is the strong posthumous presence of Meena, and the sense that Meena’s story gives RAWA a unique history and philosophy. Meena is held up as an almost saint like figure within the organisation. Households of RAWA members always contain photos of her, as do the RAWA schools and hospitals. Her death profoundly influenced the organisation, not only in terms of leadership structure as mentioned earlier but also in terms of a shared past and creating a recommitment to the cause. Protests at some point often include chants promising to “avenge her spilt blood”. Furthermore her ideas and philosophy are very much still present in the organisation, and members still refer to her and following the path for Afghanistan that she began. This sense of a group solidarity through the unique shared experience of Meena’s leadership shows RAWA has a history prior to and quite separate from western involvement.

Another key significant aspect of the role of Meena is that she is seen personally by many as a model. It is documented that during key personal events in her life such as her marriage, the birth of her children and the killing of her husband she was conscious of modelling the changes in society she wanted to see. She was very deliberate in demonstrating marriage as a partnership and pregnancy and motherhood as not debilitating conditions that would stop her work. This message was not intended purely for Afghan women, but for people respecting rights everywhere. One poem titled ‘Meena lives within us’ contains the revealing lines, “Every time a woman stands up in America, in Asia, in Africa, every time RAWA protects a woman’s rights, every time a new girl enters a RAWA school, wherever there is a

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163 Brodsky Anne (2003) With All Our Strength pg 29
164 ibid pg 30
165 Bernard, Carol (2002) Veiled courage pg 20
women’s movement, Meena is marching right beside them.” This is a particularly apt example as the poet Neesha Mirchandani is not a RAWA member, just simply inspired by RAWA, and Meena. RAWA thus can be viewed as having a role in influencing, rather than being influenced. This is the major goal of the framing process.

The third key indicator of RAWA’s localised universalist stance is its outspokenness on the American and UN presence in Afghanistan. This is firstly in relation to support America gave Taliban members in the war against the USSR, and also its current backing of the Northern Alliance, which RAWA regards as equally destructive for Afghanistan especially during the Jehadi period (1992-1996) when rape and torture of women was rampant. Many statements such as, “because of this policy (of invasion) they have plunged our people into an horrific concern and anxiety in fear of re-experiencing the dreadful happenings of the years of the Jihadis”, indicate their opposition to American occupation. Their statements to the UN are equally bold: “the UN should stop efforts that prolong the domination of the most sanguinary, anti-democracy and anti-women terrorists of the Taliban and the Northern Alliance over our suffering country.”

A broad anti-war or pacifist stance can also be detected within RAWA’s stance on the impact of US policy. RAWA makes frequent statements mentioning civilian

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casualties and condemning violence, “An American military presence in Afghanistan has no benefit for our people. In addition, thousands of civilians lost their lives because of cluster bombs and ‘friendly fire’.” RAWA has also been vocal on the failure of the occupation to actually achieve anything positive, particularly when the resulting government consists of various people from previous regimes. With this sort of independent stance against western involvement in Afghanistan it is hard to simply equate RAWA’s universalist rights stance with a pro-western one.

The universalist/relativist distinction in human rights theory does little to understand the reality of rights, and how they actually work in local cultures. It is somewhat of a false dichotomy because universalism can allow for the incorporation of culture into rights. Furthermore culture is a fluid entity, that can have different definitions and can evolve. The reality is that at some points RAWA deploys universalist thinking but is practically constrained by culture. This does not render their claims to rights invisible - but it does mean that culture cannot be ignored in the discussion of rights. It is clear that to assess the theoretical basis for RAWA’s work there is a need to go beyond a simple universalist/cultural relativist dichotomy, to look instead at their role in adding rights to a specific culture.

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171 Sohaila (2007) Talk on RAWA at Sydney University
CHAPTER FOUR

The International Feminist Movement and RAWA’s Response

RAWA’s relationship with feminism, as with the discussion of universal rights, highlights the significance of the organisation in providing a local grounding of international principles. RAWA’s feminist principles have created a complex relationship between the organisation and the wider movement. The first section of this chapter will examine how the international feminist movement has exerted a degree of gender essentialism in its desire to position RAWA within the movement. The second will examine the international support for RAWA, particularly from western feminists who simultaneously glorify RAWA as an anomaly in the Islamic world, and condemn the denial of women’s rights. The third section will examine the criticism, both within Afghanistan and internationally and the alternative assumptions of a RAWA being too extreme, or lacking independence. The final section will examine RAWA’s reassertion of independence and local grounding as a response to criticism. This suggests that RAWA has deployed feminism in a particularly local way, and this takes priority for the organisation over solidarity with the wider international movement.

RAWA and the International Feminist Movement

In situating RAWA within the international feminist movement, some very powerful allies are created. The Feminist Majority, RAWA’s biggest international supporter, has an enormous membership base in America and boasts that it “utilizes research and action to empower women economically, socially, and politically. Our organization
believes that feminists - both women and men, girls and boys - are the majority, but this majority must be empowered.” 172 Another key example of the alliance between RAWA and western feminists is donor support. It is through the connections with outside groups that RAWA receives the entirety of its funding.173 For instance the organisation Charity Help International has provided funding for the operation of nine RAWA orphanages, five in Pakistan and four in Afghanistan, that care for over 350 refugee children.174

Beyond financial support there is the political and moral support offered to RAWA. The fact that a group of the size of Feminist Majority can organise events such as a 2005 demonstration outside The White House is of enormous promotional benefit to RAWA, both in terms of the specific issues concerning women and Afghanistan and awareness of the organisation.175 Also it provides a key point of reference to RAWA members that their cause is being taken up internationally.176 The difficult circumstances RAWA works in makes the morale boost offered by having international supporters an imperative.

The flip side of the positive effects of moral and financial support, as with its universalist principles, is the resulting confusion over how RAWA’s message has been constructed, and more importantly by whom. RAWA is clearly a feminist organisation. Its principles of women’s equality, its staunch policy of women only

173 Sohaila (2007) Talk on RAWA for Sydney University Student Representative Council Women’s Collective delivered at Sydney University 26th July 2007
174 Charity Help International (2007) ‘RAWA’ Available at: https://www.charityhelp.org/rawa
175 ibid
176 ibid
membership and its stance against the patriarchal nature of fundamentalism make it a fairly simple categorisation to make. The difficulty comes when it is assumed that this means they are in complete agreement with feminists everywhere.

The notion of a complete synchronicity in thought and belief can be considered an example of gender essentialism. Gender essentialism is, “the notion that a unitary, ‘essential’ women’s experience can be isolated and described independently of race, class, sexual orientation, and other realities of experience.” 177 In essence, when western feminists claim representation for all women in general they risk further silencing and ignoring the perspectives of the very women that they are trying to empower. 178 This is a process of reproducing the dominance of the white, straight, socioeconomically privileged. 179 The motive of western feminists is to claim a position within the framework of RAWA and, “the best way to ensure this is to be the storyteller and hence to be in a position to decide which of all the many facts about women’s lives ought to go in the story, which ought to be left out.” 180 Theorists such as Catherine MacKinnon have long insisted that women should not be categorised by class, race sexuality or religion because there is a single ‘true’ feminism which “analyses women as women, not as subsets of some other group and not as gender-neutral beings.” 181

Essentialism is problematic because it obscures the actual constraints on an organisation fairly isolated from the international arena. The very grassroots nature of

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178 ibid
181 ibid
RAWA, the fact that they often work in small local committees of only a few members, and are concerned with simply keeping the organisation and projects in existence means that tapping into the broader international feminist movement is not possible for the vast majority of members. Furthermore, assuming feminism has a purely universal understanding is a flawed analysis. The main reason for this is universalising feminism precludes the existence of specific forms of feminist nationalism and the role of feminist social movements in nationalist projects.\textsuperscript{182} Nationalism here has to be understood not merely as the protection of existing sovereignty, or territorial claims but also incorporating more nuanced agendas of cultural autonomy.\textsuperscript{183} Also in the Afghan context such words as ‘feminist’ obviously carry negative connotations and many members may not be happy with that particular label. They are instead happy to be seen as fighting for progress and improving the lives of Afghan people, especially women but the title ‘feminist’ is simply too western. Member Zarlasht is quoted by Brodsky as saying “there have always been the labels on RAWA and we have always said that we want none of them”.\textsuperscript{184}

\textit{Supporting RAWA as Glorification}

Support for RAWA at an international level comes mainly from fairly specific and contained segments of society that is feminism. This raises two main issues in relation to understanding RAWA. The first is that support for RAWA inevitably colours assessment of the organisation, due to the temptation to emphasise their strength and skill in overcoming adversity. The second is that these groups have specific agendas

\textsuperscript{182} ibid pg570 \\
\textsuperscript{183} ibid pg 569 \\
\textsuperscript{184} Brodsky Anne (2003) \textit{With All Our Strength} pg 57
in their discussion and support of RAWA - specifically seeking to align the western feminist ideas and principles with RAWA. Thus a careful examination of these motivations and ideologies behind support for RAWA deserve close scrutiny.

The two seminal works of support for RAWA are ‘insider’s accounts’ by Cheryl Bernard and Anne Brodsky. Both these women are American feminists who chose to spend extended periods of time observing and working with RAWA in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Both have the clear purpose of explaining and defining this group for a western audience. Brodsky in particular came under close scrutiny for her account, with claims that her research was little more than hagiography. She obviously has developed quite a great, and understandable, admiration for members of RAWA because of their, “enormous strength, commitment, and willingness to sacrifice for the greater good.” Brodsky does in fact address the issue of neutrality and suggests that as a feminist qualitative researcher she acknowledges her study is merely what she experienced as the truth, and that this was enhanced by her close association with RAWA. Brodsky states that, “I believe that my real life relationship actually allowed me to gather richer information that emanates from a much more natural and honest exchange between researcher and research participant.”

Brodsky’s perspective may appear understandable given her feminist qualitative research, but at the same time some concerns have been overlooked. The major one is how this perspective affects not only the discussion of the group, but also the

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186 ibid pg 220
187 ibid pg 9
situation of women in Afghanistan. Brodksy mentions that living and working with RAWA members meant she was able to hear their immediate reactions to major events such as America and NATO entering Afghanistan and the fall of the Taliban government.\textsuperscript{189} This inevitably colours what her individual response may be. Also questionable is Brodsky’s defense of purdah (the seclusion of women for protection of honour) because it is a ‘women only space’ that women can use.\textsuperscript{190} An analysis less concerned with defending the way RAWA operates and emphasising their skills may not reach such sweeping generalisations about practices like purdah.

Cheryl Bernard’s \textit{Veiled Courage} contains many of the same difficulties as Brodsky’s work. It is even more of a glowing narrative, focussed on highlighting RAWA as the perfect response to the “ailment of gender” that exists in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{191} At one point she makes a clear statement, “for the small help I was able to give them, a determination to carry on under all and any odds would be their gift to me”.\textsuperscript{192} “While Brodsky’s and Bernard’s research is to be commended for giving such a wealth of knowledge previously not in existence about RAWA, the concerns above suggest that there is a need for further and more detailed analysis.

Brodsky’s and Bernard’s analyses belong in a broader picture of feminist ideology, which has a clear agenda of placing RAWA within their movement and aligning their principles. At the same time as western groups seek to show support and solidarity, their capacity financially and politically is inevitably so much greater than RAWA’s

\textsuperscript{189} Brodsky Anne (2003) \textit{With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan}, Routledge, New York pg 20
\textsuperscript{190} ibid pg 36
\textsuperscript{191} Bernard, Cheryl (2002) \textit{Veiled courage: inside the Afghan women’s resistance} Milsons Point, NSW: Random House pg 5.
\textsuperscript{192} ibid pg11
and this creates an imbalance. The effects of this are mixed. Western support has been crucial in internationalising RAWA and the issues of rights for women in Afghanistan. This is because with no official status or government funding RAWA could potentially be extremely isolated and less effective if there wasn’t international support.\textsuperscript{193} At the same time this creates an uneasy tension. The independence and unique local context can be lost within an international movement such as feminism.\textsuperscript{194} Alternatively, when the local context is over-emphasised RAWA appears as an exotic anomaly; almost as if women are so oppressed they shouldn’t exist but somehow have managed to. Thus there is a complex interaction that takes place between the members of RAWA and western supporters.

\textit{Criticism of RAWA}

Criticism of RAWA operates mainly at the level of ideology. The major criticisms concern the implications of their core beliefs for the local context. In particular it has been claimed that are unrepresentative, too extreme, want too much and want it too soon. These come from two very distinct areas - one seeking a complete end to the organisation and one seeking to offer advice and increase its effectiveness. There is a third, less extreme, form of criticism that operates on the basis of not active condemnation or advice, but instead a lack of support as a way of showing dissatisfaction with RAWA.

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The most obvious, and extreme form of criticism of RAWA comes from the direction of the fundamentalists that RAWA speaks out against. The rumours surrounding RAWA that have long existed within Afghanistan are used by fundamentalists as justification for their desire to see this group no longer in existence. The major rumour that has long existed is the alleged Maoist origins of RAWA. This was due to anti-Sovietism being equated with being pro-China and pro-Mao, because of the animosity between the regimes. It was also a common claim levelled during the Soviet occupation, in order to create confusion about the allegiances of resistance groups such as RAWA. Other rumours also circulated in order to create a sense of ambiguity about what RAWA stands for include alleged Pakistani Secret Service connections, and also CIA backing. Simply labelling RAWA feminist also operates as a harsh criticism in conservative Afghanistan. For instance one of the many allegations made against reformist MP Malalai Joya has been that she is a member of RAWA,"the secretive feminist organisation."

The rumours against RAWA all stem from the central notion that RAWA can somehow not be an independent women’s body operating in Afghanistan. This is a very flawed and somewhat ironic conclusion, given that is their history of critical analysis of anybody not supportive of their anti-fundamentalist, pro-woman agenda that has led to such accusations. A case in point is their condemnation of those

195 Thrupkaew Noy (2002)“What do Afghan women want? A dramatic and militant Afghan feminist group has captured the West's imagination. But does it offer what the women of a shattered society need most?” The American Prospect, August 26, 2002 v13 i15 p27(4)
197 ibid
198 Thrupkaew. Noy (2002)“What do Afghan women want? A dramatic and militant Afghan feminist group has captured the West's imagination. But does it offer what the women of a shattered society need most?” The American Prospect, August 26, 2002 v13 i15 p27(4)
such as expat journalist Fevziye Barlas who believe that reconciliation and working with the Northern Alliance is necessary at this time to establish peace.\textsuperscript{201} For RAWA this is a complete betrayal as, “They have yet to prove, or even offer, a single shred of reason or credible evidence suggesting that they would not repeat their prior atrocities.”\textsuperscript{202} This sort of refusal to stray from their outspoken stance indicates a strong sense of group autonomy, even from those who share the goal of a peaceful Afghanistan.

A clear example of an advisory critic is Fox New’s Wendy McElroy. She has written several scathing attacks on both RAWA and its western feminist supporters, particularly the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMN). McElroy is concerned RAWA’s outspokenness, particularly in relation to the war. She believes that such a political stance is forcing its western supporters to run “counter to the military and US diplomacy.”\textsuperscript{203} While this may be a legitimate concern for western supporters to consider, the rest of the claims made by McElroy seem to be based not so much on RAWA’s aims or ideological position, but on the efficiency of the organisation. She compares them unfavourably to The Christian Children’s Fund (CCF) in terms of letter writing from projects to ensure transparency for donors. McElroy states that “as the CCF sponsor of an Ethiopian child, I communicated with her even during times of war.”\textsuperscript{204} Her other main criticism is the lack of availability of RAWA members extrapolating from this that “RAWA does not invite questions.”\textsuperscript{205}

\textsuperscript{200} RAWA(2002) ”RAWA Statement on International Women's Day” , Mar.8, 2002
\textsuperscript{201} http://www.rawa.org/mar8-02en.htm Accessed:202.8.2007
\textsuperscript{202} ibid

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McElroy’s numerous problems with RAWA seem centred around a central argument that it is these difficulties with RAWA that are bringing western feminist supporters into disrepute. McElroy states that, “whether maintaining silence or issuing blanket approvals, PC feminists are not likely to call for an accounting from RAWA. It might lead to an accounting of themselves in this same matter.” Noy Thrupkaew’s argument that RAWA can only be appropriately understood within a western feminist framework supports McElroy’s criticism of the close relationship between RAWA and its supporters. This again harks back to the issue of independence. It creates an unfair sense that if RAWA is inefficient, if it does not operate in the same way as a western NGO, then somehow this is the fault of the western feminist supporters who aren’t influencing them enough.

The lack of active support domestically within Afghanistan operates as the final form of criticism. The reality that RAWA is small and not widely supported calls into question the possibility that support for an ideology will translate into support for their methods and practices. Choosing not to take part in RAWA projects and activities indicates passive disapproval of their political protests and criticism of the government. It should be stressed that this does not necessarily mean disapproval of RAWA’s principles or the goal of women’s equality and democracy for Afghanistan, but instead perhaps a reluctance to embrace their outspokenness and unwillingness to compromise. RAWA member Sohaila has spoken of the difficulty of

Date Accessed :12 03.2007
205 ibid
206 ibid
convincing people to accept RAWA and its services.\textsuperscript{209} This may be due to the
rumours mentioned earlier, or an understandable reluctance to put up with the
inevitable security risk. More broadly there is the reluctance in the Afghan
community to accept women as capable of an effective role in public, let alone in
political activism.\textsuperscript{210} This has contributed to the outside analysis of RAWA as
somewhat of an anomaly within Afghanistan.

\textit{RAWA’s response to criticism}

RAWA made a definitive response to Wendy McElroy’s criticisms, in the form of a
statement released on their site and sent to McElroy, Fox News and McElroy’s
publication website ifeminists.com.\textsuperscript{211} This response is premised solely on the issue of
authenticity; specifically how much does McElroy and any other western critic who
make similar statements really know about conditions in Afghanistan and the context
in which RAWA works? McElroy’s apparent complete insensitivity to the conditions
in which RAWA operates makes this a very easy argument to make. RAWA does this
in a particularly understated and almost ironic style stating that they, “should be
forgiven for not organising letters from projects to individual donors because of ‘the
small problem that even our mail service is still not fully operational’”\textsuperscript{212}. The list of
references at the end detailing the US involvement with the Taliban and Northern
Alliance also serve as a sharp rebuke and a reminder that, whatever writers like
McElroy may feel about RAWA, it is difficult to deny that RAWA has existed and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{209} Sohaila (2007) Talk on RAWA for Sydney University Student Representative Council Women’s
Collective delivered at Sydney University 26\textsuperscript{th} July 2007
\item \textsuperscript{210} Bernard, Cheryl (2002) \textit{Veiled Courage} pg 4
\item \textsuperscript{211} RAWA (2002) Statement ‘RAWA’s answer to Wendy McElroy’ : October 18\textsuperscript{th} 200 Available from
\texttt{www.rawa.org} Date Accessed: 17.3.2007
\item \textsuperscript{212} ibid
\end{itemize}
worked in conditions impossible to fathom. RAWA’s statement on America entering Afghanistan also highlights RAWA’s clear nationalistic focus. This statement points out America’s history of supporting fundamentalists and the need for “revolution from within”. This argument serves a further purpose of responding to domestic disapproval because it reinforces that RAWA claims not to simply be feminist, but to be concerned with a positive future for Afghanistan.

The one caveat to RAWA’s defense of national context is that it will not completely distance itself from supporters in the west, or western feminists entirely. Cheryl Bernard suggests that RAWA is ‘not planning to give you any lectures about tradition or religion or to instruct you to mind your own decadent western imperialist business’, that they need and happily accept outside assistance. Her conceptualisations are based on personal experience and interaction with the people of Afghanistan and her specific case study of RAWA members. The many logos of supporters appearing on the RAWA website, including the Feminist Majority are a testament to this. Ultimately, what is uncovered is a complicated relationship where “international aid agencies, human rights organizations, and US feminist activists conceded the power of representation to RAWA” but still control the means to make it viable.

The difficult question that neither Mc Elroy and other critics or RAWA answer is the fairness of the assertion that the specific Afghanistan context makes RAWA appear to be beyond outside criticism. McElroy fails to explain why she is holding up RAWA.

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214 Bernard, Cheryl (2002) Veiled Courage pg 186
to the same standards as an organisation with presumably larger resources and fewer
challenges, like CCF. McElroy instead goes straight for technicalities of
communication services.\(^{216}\) RAWA alternatively, seeks to completely neutralise any
western criticism by pleading contextual misunderstanding. This is achieved through
statements such as “It wouldn’t be irrelevant to request McElroy and other interested
parties to come to Pakistan and Afghanistan once, so that with the least acquaintance
with RAWA's activities they can come to know how RAWA spends the funds.” \(^{217}\)
Ultimately what is lacking is awareness that valid outside criticism such as McElroy’s
comment concerning RAWA’s harsh treatment of other activists and also RAWA’s
response are the result of RAWA’S ideology, but also its unique place in post conflict
Afghanistan.\(^{218}\)

It is clear that RAWA has been interpreted, particularly in the west, as having a
feminist message of equality and social justice. This construction of RAWA as the
feminist movement’s representatives in Afghanistan is problematic because it shows
some gender essentialism, and assumes that all Afghan women support RAWA’s call
for universal women’s rights. RAWA’s instead represents a unique response to the
status of Afghan women. Improving the status of women in Afghanistan, according to
RAWA, hinges on the acceptance of modern Islamic feminist interpretations of the
inseparability of democracy and gender equality.

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\(^{217}\) RAWA (2002) Statement ‘RAWA’s answer to Wendy McElroy’: October 18th 200 Available from
www.rawa.org Date Accessed: 17.3.2007
Date Created: 14.3.2003
CONCLUSION

“There have always been the labels on RAWA and we have always said that we want none of them”\textsuperscript{219}

\textsuperscript{219} Brodsky Anne (2003) \textit{With All Our Strength} pg 57
In explaining the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan in post-Taliban Afghanistan this thesis has considered two essential perspectives: the group’s construction of itself, its framing and response to issues, and the outside theories that have informed this framing. These perspectives have been influenced by several key factors. The first is the national context that RAWA’s Islamic feminism is responding to, meaning the construction of gender within Islam, and the conservative patriarchal bent this has taken in Afghanistan. The second is cultural relativism as a response to universal human rights, and the possibility of an interpretation of universalism that shows RAWA seeking to add rights to culture, which in turn suggests the adding of culture to universalism. The final is the gender essentialism inherent within feminism that has coloured both the outside analysis of RAWA, and RAWA’s nationalistic emphasis in response to it. What these factors indicate is that RAWA’s core ideology frames a locally-based human rights solution to the oppression of women. While these factors can be isolated and treated as individual explanations for the existence and practices of RAWA, the intersection between them provide a much more nuanced understanding. It acknowledges the independence and agency of RAWA as an Afghan women’s group while accepting that their philosophy draws inspiration from international principles.

The project of adding rights to culture is a fraught one, and the same local context that provides RAWA with agency through authenticity is also enormously oppressive. The construction of gender in Islamic countries, and Afghanistan in particular, provides a useful insight into the constraining forces at work in the project of adding rights to
culture. The relativist paradigm, to which orthodox Islamic scholarship belongs, seems to offer an extremely plausible explanation for the situation of women in Afghanistan. The patriarchal tribal culture has incorporated specific aspects of the Islamic religion, such as the Wahabi doctrine on punishment to reinforce the subjugation of women. On the other hand, the existence of RAWA means this cannot be the entire analysis. Their secular principles place them firmly within an Islamic feminism that rejects the notion of religion having any place in government. They show Islamic women not to be entirely passive. They also show that Islam and its role in Afghanistan are not monolithic. There are competing interpretations, and while conservative Islam dominates, it cannot be said to be the only voice operating on rights for women in Afghanistan.

RAWA’s history, goals and principles can be viewed as existing within a process that seeks to frame women’s rights in Afghanistan using a universalist discourse. This operates on several levels - from response to criticism, to involving the international community, pressure on the Karzai government and long term persuasion of individuals and families. Universal human rights have long been a contentious issue, and this is especially applicable to the discussion of women’s rights as human rights. While conceptualising rights at a universal level provides a base level for achieving lasting change, the specific context in which rights violations take place risks being ignored. Similarly, when the focus becomes defending a specific culture, the risk is sanctioning gross and systematic violence. RAWA shows one possible perspective on this because it is representative of a locally grounded response to human rights violations that cannot be separated from its universalist principles.
RAWA’s universal response is so authentic because it is intertwined with a sense of independance, and thus indicates that universalist conceptions of rights have a place beyond the west. RAWA’s principles represent the possibility of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the other instruments of international human rights law, actually being universal, as opposed to a western construct. The historical importance of founder Meena and RAWA’s rebukes to western feminist supporters, further reinforce this. This is a more nuanced understanding of rights that allows fluidity, evolution and a multiplicity in values in discussing culture. It becomes a process of acknowledging discrepancies in application of rights by adding culture to discussion of rights and vice versa. As this is essentially RAWA’s core goal, the group operates as a particularly pertinent example.

While feminism has a global basis, there is no denying that RAWA’s unique history and uncompromising stance against the west shows that, again, the tension between the local and global has enormous influence on RAWA’s principles and activities. Feminist desires to highlight RAWA as a worthy cause mean that it has been glorified by particular sources. At the same time this has made RAWA vulnerable to criticism, and analysed in the same way much larger and well-resourced organisations may be. In order to understand the way that RAWA has framed itself and its message, it is imperative to acknowledge the ways RAWA has emphasised its national identity in response to criticism. The national history and context has been crucial in the development of the organisation. The ways that the response of the organisation has fluctuated from resistance to outside forces, to combating the domestic force of fundamentalism, shows that it has a definite nationalist political agenda for Afghanistan; secular democracy founded on equality and respect for human rights.
What can be viewed is the intersection of nationalism, and local response with broader universalism and feminist constructions.

The Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan is quite simply a group that should not exist. Their leader and ultimate inspiration was assassinated. They come from a time of intellectualism and activism that has passed. They are Islamic women in a country renowned for its conservative and patriarchal interpretation of the religion. They aren’t even officially recognised by their own government. They are not based in the west, yet their principles are those of universalism, feminism and democracy. Despite all this, RAWA has continued, and in fact expanded, during its thirty years in existence. This suggests that while the interlinking forces of nationalism, feminism and human rights explain their ideology, practices, and even outside analysis of them, they do not in and of themselves give sufficient explanation. Also, it is difficult to ignore the reality that RAWA’s discursive power to frame a local feminist universalism has not translated into the changes RAWA stands for. It is this ‘dangerously radical’, independent and unique construction of human rights that makes the group so threatened in present day Afghanistan. It is RAWA’s sense of a unique and independent history and philosophy, influenced by international principles of universalism and feminism, but not determined by them, that account for the continued existence of the group in the most difficult of circumstances.

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