

## Occupied Afghan women's lives: multiple experiences, multiple consciousnesses

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To conclude, this is a very interesting book that attempts to fulfil two aims and doesn't quite succeed in doing so. The first two parts are excellent in describing the impact and prevalence of gendered based violence within the historical context of international law. Additionally, relevant extracts from international statutes are included in the appendices, which would make an excellent reference for students. In my opinion, the authors failed to successfully marry this critique of the practice of gendered violence with the moral theory of the Authenticity Project. To conclude, I felt that it might have been better to publish two books, allowing a more adequate exploration of the distinct parts of the book rather than bringing the two things together.

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### OCCUPIED AFGHAN WOMEN'S LIVES: MULTIPLE EXPERIENCES, MULTIPLE CONSCIOUSNESSES

Elaheh Rostami Povey  
*Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion*  
London: Zed Books, 2007, 159 pp., ISBN 978-1-84277-855-5

In *Afghan Women*, Povey provides us with a powerful account of women's struggle for survival and resistance during the Afghan wars, illustrated by life stories collected among various groups of women both within Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora in Pakistan, Iran, the UK and the US. Women's voices emerge out of the narrative; voices that have hardly been heard since the invasion of Afghanistan; voices imprinted with a material realism in great contrast with western representations of Afghan women since 9/11. From a feminist postcolonial standpoint, Povey depicts Afghan women as politically conscious of the rules of global politics, having a clear vision of how women's status should be improved from within, taking into account culture and religion, but first of all the material conditions of Afghan society under western occupation.

Five years after the 'liberation' of Afghanistan, security conditions are worsening, attacks against girls' schools are multiplying, and threats against politically active women are increasing. Povey questions the extent to which the US and their allies were really interested in the plight of Afghan women. She shows how the condition of women has been used to develop a 'moral grammar of war' (Weber, 2005) and to gain public support for military intervention. As the 'War on Terror' seems to have reached a point of no return, Povey warns western countries about the risk for Afghan women of getting caught in the middle of an international discursive struggle, at times portrayed as a clash of civilizations and at other times as simply a matter of human rights, and a nationalist discourse that defends with absolute certainty the terms of a contested terrain in which they themselves have had very little input in creating.

Povey talks about Afghan women's political agenda for defending women's rights. She explains how the international community has been deaf to Afghan women's views on gender relations. She speaks about an indigenous women's movement that has emerged out of Afghan women's solidarity networks developed during the various Afghan wars. If this is what I expected to find when I came

back to Kabul early last year, the reality I faced was slightly more complex. Women who ran clandestine schools and underground businesses during the Taliban era are now running after funding to keep their activities going. The woman's question has been hijacked by the neoliberal agenda imposed by the West, as Povey demonstrates and this has deeply challenged women's capacities to define their own strategies. To be able to survive, women's organizations have to conform to a western approach to the promotion of women's rights. The Afghan Women's Network, for instance, has become more like an implementing agency, running workshops on Violence Against Women in different provinces of Afghanistan where insecurity has become such an issue that even talking about human rights appears totally meaningless. Its original vocation of supporting a network of women activists has almost totally disappeared due to competition for funding among women's civil society organizations (CSOs). One female employee of the Network explained to me how she deeply disliked going to the provinces in order to facilitate such workshops but felt compelled to do so in order to keep her job. She said: 'I was told that if I did not want to do this job, I could resign.' Because of the current economic situation, the membership of women's CSOs is therefore almost always directly related to the funding available to employ women rather than indicating a commitment to women's cause. Women in CSOs could be working for the UN one day and a private sector firm the next. CSOs are for the most part absent in public debates on matters of importance to communities, especially the women within them. From what I have observed, there is no unified women's movement with a clear and well-defined agenda. Instead, there are a variety of women's organizations competing against each other and using the jargon of women's rights in order to attract funding. This does not mean that women who work within these organizations have no substance – they need to have some to survive in such an environment – or no political views on gender. But their room to manoeuvre and to propose alternatives is extremely narrow. Not only, as Povey argues, have 'women's rights issues become depoliticized and . . . hijacked by government and international financial institutions' (p. 138) but this phenomenon has also modified the original nature of women's networks and the profiles of women who work within them.

Povey suggests that Afghan women have developed personal and creative strategies to resist oppressive gender norms. She explains how women's acquaintance with other women's movements in Iran and in Pakistan has, in some cases, influenced them in the development of political consciousness. With Abu Lughod (1990), I think we need to be careful not to romanticize discourses of resistance. Many of the women I talked to did not see an immediate reason for opposing traditional gender norms and preferred to comply rather than resist in order to maintain the stability of social relations. In addition, very few Afghan women who had formerly been in exile in Iran had had the opportunity to be introduced to the Iranian women's movement during those years. Instead, because of racism and discriminatory laws applying to Afghan refugees in these countries, most exiled Afghan women socialized inside their own community and so could not be influenced by the women's movements in Iran and Pakistan.

My fieldwork in the Women's National Dormitory located on Kabul University campus serves to contradict Povey's notion that Afghan women are routinely resisting oppressive gender norms. There, I observed how young women recently

returned to Afghanistan after long years of exile, despite their living far away from their families, were conforming with, and so reinforcing, these oppressive norms in order to fit into Afghan society. For example, Masoma, a 21-year-old woman who studies physical education at the University of Kabul, explained the hard time she had during the first months of her return: 'When I was in Iran, people called me "Afghani! Afghani!" When I arrived in Afghanistan, because of my accent, people called me "Irani". So I changed the way I dressed and I tried to get rid of my accent and now people call me "Hazara"<sup>1</sup> but I feel Afghan. I am Afghan.' This example illustrates how young women are not ready to bargain their freedom and instead conform to social norms. They constantly try to lose their Iranian accents, wear longer veils and try to adopt a low profile in order not to be pointed out as 'foreigners'.

Young women's studying in the capital city depends on their capacity to maintain their reputation. Walking the long corridors of the dormitory during the examination period, I saw them seated on the floor, rocking their upper body forward and backward above their books, as if reciting the Q'uran. Girls feel they have to work harder than boys in order to keep their families' trust and to be able to continue their studies. Most of them do not dare reveal to classmates that they stay in the dormitory for fear of gossip. Exchange of gifts and small services as well as invitations for tea are part of the everyday life rituals they perform in order to gain each other's respect and avoid the spreading of negative rumours. Even in the absence of their relatives, they feel responsible for maintaining their family's honour. The experience of migration does not, therefore, necessarily lead to transformation in gender roles and identities.

Finally, the book argues that gender has remained a non-issue at governmental level. But contrary to Povey's analysis, I think it is reductive to say that women who work in Afghan institutions 'ignore the suffering of millions of women, men and children in Afghanistan and the region' (p. 139). Women who have managed to get into the parliament, for instance, are currently struggling to keep their place safe. Their participation in political life cannot be considered a guarantee of the promotion of gender-sensitive policies. These women tell themselves: 'First I make it for myself and later on I'll make it for other women.' They do talk about gender and some have ideas about how to challenge oppressive patriarchal norms in culturally appropriate terms, but they are in such fragile positions that their capacity to address these issues in public remains extremely limited. For some women, who participated in the Mujahedin resistance movement, their mere presence in politics is a sufficient reward and an acknowledgement of their efforts. Others who aspire to achieve more for women know that this depends on their capacity to get the backing of political parties. Prominent new female political figures have emerged, some of whom have crystallized major hopes for both Afghan men and women. But the challenge is huge and expectations are high.

In documenting the lives of Afghan women during war and under western occupation, Povey's work represents a precious contribution to academic knowledge. It has answered an urgent need for contextualizing the woman question in Muslim majority societies at a time of western imperial domination in this part of the world. As the author reflects, 'Saving Muslim women was and still is a typical imperial strategy' (p. 139). The cosmetic measures imposed by the international community have proved to be of little use in enforcing significant change for the majority of Afghan

women. But as much as we, academics, would like to see women engaged in finding their own motives for resistance, we need to be careful not to project our own fantasies on them. The variety of Afghan women's experiences has engendered a multiplicity of identities, in which patterns of resistance can be found in practices that also appear, at first sight, as acts of compliance.

#### NOTE

1. Hazara is the third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, after the Pashtoon (also called Paxto or Patan) and the Tadjik. The Hazara community is from *shiah* confession and therefore represents a religious minority that has faced much discrimination throughout history.

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#### SEX, WORK AND MIGRATION: THE DYNAMICS AND REGIMES OF CARE AND CONTROL

Laura Maria Agustin  
*Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*  
 London: Zed Books, 2007, 224 pp., ISBN 9781-84277-8609

*Sex at the Margins* is a very timely book in the context of current debates, dialogue and dominant discourses around the analytic intersections of the commercial sex industry and migration. This book is the first to grapple with the intersections of migrating to sell sex with a specific focus on the agencies and organizations including researchers involved in 'helping' the stereotypical subjects/objects of research – sex workers, poor women and migrants.

Taking an ethnographic approach, Agustin tells the reader:

I did field work in order to gain information until now absent from most discussions of commercial sex, on the practices of social agents attempting to help people who sell sex . . . I wanted a theoretical space that would allow me to resist moralising as well as western cultures' claim that its values are best. (pp. 136–7)

The central thesis is that 'those declaring themselves to be helpers actively reproduce the marginalisation they condemn . . . social helpers consistently deny the