

Afghani Women's Resistance

Their Struggle for Autonomy under the Soviet Occupation and Taliban Rule

by

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ABSTRACT

The American-led 'war on terror' affected how media outlets and some contemporary literature addressed and stereotyped Islam. One of the most common stereotypes regarded the status of women in society. The constant images of oppressed Afghani women generated a wave of negativity toward Islam. Afghani women were portrayed as passive characters during the Taliban rule awaiting liberation from the west. Defending their rights became one of the moral justifications for waging the 'war on terror' after the tragedy of 9/11. Gender politics in Afghanistan is closely tied to the regime in power. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the social and cultural transformation of society that followed also directly affected women and their identity as Muslims. Both the Soviet and the Taliban regimes envisioned a drastic transformation of women's participation in the public sphere. Each regime's gender politics oppressed Afghani women and sought to take away their agency. Some women welcomed the freedom under the Soviets, but others found the freedoms to be oppressive. The Taliban aimed to preserve men's authority over women. However, Afghani women never gave up the hope of freedom and equality. My main argument is to challenge the contemporary belief that Afghani women were passive characters in their history. This study introduces a fresh perspective on to women's role as change makers in the society. I argue that Afghani women maintained their autonomy and fought for their rights, before the rest of the world rushed to liberate them. They engaged in different forms of resistance from directly attacking the oppressors to keeping their resistance hidden. This thesis challenges the notion of Afghani women as victims in need of saving. On the contrary, they were the agents of change in their communities. On the basis of ethnographic interviews and three

memoirs written by women who lived in Afghanistan during Soviet and Taliban rule.
Their resistance against the oppressors is an affirmation of their courage and bravery.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to deconstruct the images of Afghani women as passive characters, and introduce an alternative view originating from Afghani women's perspectives. The constant images of oppressed Afghani women in the media generated a wave of negativity and stereotypes in the West. The Taliban's oppression of women resulted in portraying them as passive characters in the society awaiting liberation from the west, but their plight began long before the Taliban took over.

Gender politics in Afghanistan is closely tied to the regime in power. The Soviet invasion of 1979 and its social and cultural transformation of Afghan society directly affected women's identity as Muslims. The Taliban regime, similar to the Soviets, envisioned a social and religious transformation for women. The Soviet Union and the Taliban generated the development of underdevelopment.¹ In other words, the Soviet invasion and the Taliban takeover resulted in war and conflicts. The consequences of war and conflicts were: death, poverty, displacement, famine, destruction of the national infrastructure and economy. These regimes victimized Afghani people, thus affecting their everyday life.

Afghani women never gave up the hope of freedom and equality. Women resistance was a counter action to the Soviet and the Taliban oppressive policies. The main argument of this research is to challenge the media portrayal that Afghani women are passive characters in the public sphere. Afghani women maintained their autonomy before the rest of the world came to their rescue, despite the challenges they faced under

¹ Frank, Andre Gunder. 1966. The Development of Underdevelopment. *Monthly Review Archive* 18 (4): 3.

the Soviets and the Taliban. Both regimes' oppressive policies provoked their opposition. Every aspect of their lives, private or public, was altered. This prompted many to engage in different forms of resistance. The interviewees and memoir writers engaged in both violent and non-violent form of resistance.

A. Historical Background

To understand the social status of women in Afghanistan and establish the context in which their oppression took place, it is necessary to look at the geography and history. Afghanistan has a long and rich past marked by war and ethnic conflict. It has been subjected to constant invasion and conquest due to its geographical location on the crossroads of Central Asia, which extends eastward from Iran and incorporates the Himalayan range, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and China.

Due to its location and diverse cultures, Afghanistan has been the roundabout of the ancient world. It has been part of the Achaemenid Persian Empire under Darius the Great, the Macedonian empire of Alexander the Great, and the Kushan Empire. Islam was brought to Afghanistan by an Arab raid in 700 C. E. In the thirteenth century, the Mongolian Genghis Khan invaded the country. In the eighteenth century, a group of Pashtun tribes defeated the Moghuls and created their own empire under Ahmad Shah Abdali. Great Britain tried to bring Afghanistan under its rule in the nineteenth century, but suffered a defeat in the first Anglo-Afghan war.² In the second attempt, the British gained control of many territories and the external affairs of the country. They promised to protect Afghanistan from foreign domination, especially from Russia, by providing

² Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2004), 26.

weapons and annual subsidy to local rulers. One of the most powerful rulers at that time was Abdur Rahman Khan known as ‘Iron Amir’, who created a powerful army. Habibullah became the king in 1901, after his father Abdur Rahman passed away. Habibullah introduced a modern style of education, which had a tremendous impact on both male and female education. Under the rule of Amanullah the son of Habibullah, Afghanistan defeated the British in the third Anglo-Afghan war and gained control over its foreign affairs. Amanullah created the first constitution. Amanullah’s attempts to seize power from the tribal rulers resulted in his overthrow by Tajik Bacha-yi-Saqao in 1928. Shortly afterwards, Nadir Khan, a Pashtun, assassinated Bacha-yi-Saqao and started a dynasty that lasted until 1978 coup.

The people of Afghanistan are ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse. The Pashtuns constitute the dominant group and live in the southern part of the Afghanistan and in the Pakistan side of the border. They are traditionally pastoral nomads with a strong tribal society. Each tribe is divided into clans and sub-clans. They have a distinct language, Pashto, which is one of the two official languages of Afghanistan. Pashto is spoken by 35% of people in Afghanistan.³ The second largest ethnic group is Tajik in the northern valleys of Kabul and Badakshan. Tajiks speak Dari, which is widely spoken in Afghanistan. They are related to the people of Tajikistan, which shares a border with Afghanistan. Other minority ethnic groups include Hazara, Torkoman, Uzbek, Baluchi, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq, Pashai and Kyrghyz. My informants come from diverse ethnic backgrounds including Tajik, Pashtun and Bayot.

³ CIA. The World Fact Book. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>.

The strongest tie between the different ethnic groups of Afghanistan is Islam. Afghanis pledge allegiance to their elders in their local communities. Sunni Islam is the dominant faith (84%); the rest of the Muslim population are followers of Shia Islam (15%).⁴ Islam is an integral part of life in Afghanistan, thus to understand Afghanistan means looking at the religion of Islam. Islam was brought to Afghanistan by Arab conquerors more than thirteen hundred years ago, and it is now the official religion of the country. The Islamic laws known as Shari'a along with traditional practices provide principles for people to settle personal and legal disputes. King Amanullah's modernization of Afghanistan in 1920 failed due to the opposition which was primarily religious.

B. Literature Review

In the past four decades, different groups have exploited women's rights in Afghanistan for political power. In a short amount of time, Afghani women experienced secularization under the Soviet Union. A few years after the Soviet Union left Afghanistan, women experienced increased turmoil under the Taliban regime. Since 2001, a substantial body of scholarship has been dedicated to Afghani women's plight. The majority of the scholarship concentrates on the women's rights during the Taliban years and the transformation of those rights after the U.S. intervention in 2001. The historical facts provided in the literature are mostly derived from sources other than Afghani women themselves. There are two sets of literature. The first focuses on

⁴ CIA. The World Fact Book. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>.

fundamentalism and patriarchy, under the Taliban rule, and the second, on the Soviet program of modernization and secularization.

Part of the literature review consists of the memoirs written by the women who lived in Afghanistan during the period of Soviet invasions and the Taliban rule. They provided valuable information to this study. Memoirs allow the reader to enter the story, they enable the reader to enter a world of unknown and experience feeling and thoughts as they follow a journey, which at times, does not have a happy ending. Memoirs not only provide a story, but one can learn history from them. According to Watson,

In order to understand a history, one must first appreciate the conditions that influence individuals' range of choices of behavior in their time and culture. Indeed, the creation of one's own identity; the parameters of conformity and obedience within a society; the assumption of roles in time of crisis, such as becoming a perpetrator, victim, or bystander of injustice; and the resistance to norms, ultimately make a difference to one's own life as well as to history.⁵

Afghani women's memoirs and life stories offer a new understanding of life under oppression and how Afghani women struggled to keep their autonomy despite the oppression they faced. *Zoya's Story* written in collaboration of Shekeba Hachemi, *A Bed of Red Flowers and My Forbidden Face* edited by William Morrow are memoirs about Afghani women who experienced life under the Soviet occupation and the Taliban rule. In *Zoya's Story*, Zoya recalls her life under the Soviets and the important mission of the RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women) (See Appendix B). In her book *A Bed of Red Flowers*, Nelofer Pazira writes about her struggle against the Soviets to keep her autonomy and Muslim identity under a secular government (See Appendix B). Latifa recalls the horrific experience of living under the Taliban regime in *My Forbidden*

⁵ Jinx Watson, *Learning History through Literary Memoir* (The Alan Review, 2002), 1.

Face (See Appendix B). These memoirs provided a complete picture that Afghani women are not as passive as they are portrayed. Women resisted in different shapes and forms: some engaged in violent resistance, and others in non-violent forms of resistance.

Some Islamic feminists have been documenting the ways in which Muslim women resisted patriarchal culture. In *Velvet Jihad: Muslim Women's Quiet Resistance to Islamic Fundamentalism*, Faegheh Sherazi reveals the stories of Muslim women activists resisting the gender-discriminatory practices of Islamic fundamentalists across the world. According to Sherazi, a “velvet jihadist” is a person who resists the oppression of Islamic fundamentalists by engaging in activism despite challenges and hardships.⁶ The central analysis of the book is about how women from different walks of life questioned gender inequalities in an effort to destabilize patriarchal hegemony and build a just community where both genders can fully participate. Sherazi's analysis of the resistance strategies in the Muslim majority countries displays that Muslim women across the globe retained their agency. Sherazi moves beyond portraying Muslim women as passive characters and creates the platform for further research on the ways Muslim women resisted their oppressors. Sherazi concentrated on Iranian women, but my study will further her argument in the context of Afghanistan and Afghani women.

Similar to Sherazi, Lila Abu-Lughod refers to Muslim women as agents of change in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*. Lila Abu-Lughod argues that the oppression of women is much more complex than is assumed and that government structure, politics,

⁶ Faegheh Sherazi, *Velvet Jihad: Muslim Women's Quiet Resistance to Islamic Fundamentalism* (Gainesville: University Press, 2009).

and economics are closely linked to the subjugation of women.⁷ The book is based on anthropological fieldwork in the Bedouin communities of Egypt. Abu-Lughod mentions women who used their religious knowledge and text to fight for their rights. For example, Abu-Lughod talks about a woman who used verses from the Qur'an to get her share of inheritance in a society where women are denied rights to own property. My study will further the discourse of Muslim women's resistance. However, the concentration will not only be on resistance against Islamic fundamentalism, but also against secularization by the communist government and the Soviets.

Contrary to Abu-Lughod, Katherine Kiveat and Scott Heidler portray Afghani women as passive and oppressed. *Women of Courage: Intimate Stories from Afghanistan* pair portraits of Afghani women with short interviews about their lives in Afghanistan before, during, and after the overthrow of the Taliban.⁸ Their interviewees included a housewife who burned herself, a flight attendant, a photojournalist, an actress, a saleswoman, a filmmaker, an abused wife, a presidential candidate, and many more Afghani women. The book contains forty interviews with women from different walks of life. The authors mention that three of the women have passed away since their portraits appeared. Extremists shot two of the women, and another one of them died giving birth to her first child. Kiviatic and Heidler argue that these women were "victim to the very aspect of life in Afghanistan they were fighting to change."⁹ *The Women of Courage* not only

⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁸ Katherine Kiveat, Scott Heidler, *Women of Courage: Intimate Stories from Afghanistan* (Layton: Gibbs Smith, 2007).

⁹ Katherine Kiveat, Scott Heidler, *Women of Courage: Intimate Stories from Afghanistan* (Layton: Gibbs Smith, 2007), X.

offers a glimpse into the lives and struggles of women in a changing country, but their hope for a better future. Kiviat and Heidler's collection of personal stories portrayed Afghani women lacking agency and being victims of abuse with the hope of being rescued by others. The women in the book were not asked whether they have done anything to bring a change to their living condition; they were only asked about what kind of suffering they endured in the hands of Taliban men. My study asked the question whether women participate in any forms of resistance against the Soviets and the Taliban.

The above literature is about Afghani women, and it is important to note that women under Soviet occupation in other countries had similar experiences. Bulgaria was under the Soviets for over 50 years. As a result the life of women changed substantially. Kristen Ghodsee examines aspects of political change, and focuses on nominal Muslims whose lives were transformed because of the new political and economic order. The Soviet occupation secularized Muslims and distanced them from Islam. The culture and religion of local people were under attack by the communist secular ideology. The fieldwork and theoretical concepts of the book are of significant importance to understand the debate on the rise of religiosity and gender shifting among Muslims in Bulgaria and other countries after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Although Afghanistan's social transformation was not as extensive as Bulgaria's, similarities can be observed when it comes to women's role in society. Under socialist rule, veiling was highly discouraged and prohibited from public spaces. As a result the concept of "hijab" became highly politicized. A conflict arose between traditional, "orthodox," and liberal Bulgarian Muslims influenced by socialist ideology. During the Soviet invasion, the Afghani people were divided on the matter of veiling and clothing, as were Muslims in

Bulgaria. Although the book provides substantial information about Muslim women's identity under the occupation, it fails to consider women's role and resistance to the secular government. Bulgarian women were portrayed as submissive individuals who obeyed orders to unveil and change their identity to survive. However, unlike Bulgarian women, Afghani women maintained their agency; they either accepted and welcomed the secular policies or resisted.

Adeeb Khalid's book, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* explains the relevance of history and the Soviet legacy to better understand Islam and politics in Central Asia. Similar to Kristen Ghodsee, Khalid analyses the impact of imposing atheism on Muslim majority countries. In the chapter "The Soviet Assault on Islam," Khalid concentrates on the Soviet Union's agenda to transform Islam. The Soviets controlled religion and social affiliation. The radical transformation created new ethnic boundaries, restricted religious activity, attacked the role of ulama and altered traditional ways of living. However, some native elites embraced socialism to change the system and create a better society. The Soviet Union's cultural transformation took place in the form of schooling, secular education, and assault on religious beliefs. Some people supported the changes, whereas others resisted. Khalid's arguments are relevant to Afghani women, because some of them became enthusiastic supporters of communism. On the other hand, others opposed the Soviets, because they believed that Soviets aimed to gain their support through social reforms such as education. According to Khalid,

Soviets used education as a way to influence children from an early age, which was true in the case of Afghanistan.¹⁰

C. Methodology

The goal this research is to highlight women's experiences under Soviet occupation in 1979 and Taliban's rule in 1996. This study is based on a wide variety of sources: ethnographic interviews and memoirs. Its primary focus is on women's education, employment and modesty. The three memoirs, *A Bed of Red Flowers*, *Zoya's Story* and *My Forbidden Face*, cover a variety of topics about women's role in society. They provide valuable information from Afghani women's perspectives, since their authors experienced the oppression of the regimes first hand. Additionally, my ethnographic work includes a short survey consisting of five questions and eighteen interview questions about women's experiences. There were five female participants in the study (Alima, Rabya, Farzana, Zakia, and Anahita), age ranging from 50 to 65. All five participants lived in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion, but only four were experienced Taliban rule. Pseudonyms were used to conceal the women's identities.

The interviews supplemented by the memoirs proved that Afghani women were not passive characters, and they maintained their autonomy under the Soviets and the Taliban. The research questions included: what strategies Afghani women used to resist? Were they successful in their pursuit? What were the consequences of their resistance? What factors influenced their view and decision? Did Afghani women support or opposed the Soviets' secular ideology? Did women support or oppose the Taliban

¹⁰ Adeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

fundamentalism? On the basis of these ethnographical interviews and memoirs, it can be concluded that Afghani women maintained their autonomy both under the Soviets and the Taliban by actively resisting their oppressors. Furthermore, the study found that Afghani women had different perspectives about the Soviets' secular reforms. Some women looked at modernization positively, which contradicted some of the secondary literature I analyzed about the Soviets'. However, all women shared similar negative views about the Taliban regime. They all agreed that the Taliban's policies were hostile to women and un-Islamic.

D. Women's Perspectives

A number of factors contributed to how women perceived the regimes and their ideologies. One of the most important factors was the geographical location, urban or rural, where these women grew up. In general, women in multi ethnic cities tended to be less conservative than their rural sisters. The authors of the three memoirs were born and raised in the city of Kabul, as were my informants, Rabya, Fazana, and Anahita. Alima was from the city Mazar-e-Sharif, and spent some time in Kabul while she was a student. Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif are urban areas with people from diverse ethnic groups. In both of these cities, people had greater access to education, employment, and foreigners. However, Kandahar is not ethnically diverse, the biggest ethnic group being Pashtun, and the primary language being Pashto. Zakia was born and raised in countryside of Kandahar. Historically, people are very conservative in Kandahar compared to people in Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif. In the rural areas of the country, tribal communities are very common. Everyone in the tribes knows each other. A woman's identity is connected to

her family and the community. By contrast urban women do not consider their identity to be defined by the community, because the tribal system does not exist in the city.

However, they consider their families as part of their identities and they respect their parent's values and ideals.

Women's perspectives were not only affected by their geographical location, but also by their values and beliefs growing up. Three groups of women can be distinguished from the memoirs and interviews. Alima and Anahita perceived the Soviets and their ideology as favorable to Afghani women, and they expressed their support. Rabya and Farzana believed that some aspects of the Soviets' presence in Afghanistan were beneficial to Afghani women such as the education reforms, as well as opportunities for women to work outside the house. However, Rabya and Farzana also believed that the Soviet army killed people and started the war. On the other hand, Zakia was the only participant who did not favor the Soviets' involvement in Afghanistan and their secular reforms. Zakia, who was from Kandahar, believed that the Soviet ideology had a negative influence on Afghani people because it distanced people from their religion. Nelofer and Zoya described Soviet ideology as a threat to the Afghani people in their memoirs. They believed that the Soviet ideology considered Afghan culture and religion inferior and aimed to change it through cultural and social reforms.

Women either engaged or did not engage in resistance against the Soviets depending on their outlook and perception. Alima, Anahita, Rabya, and Farzana did not engage in any form of resistance against the Soviets, since they either supported the Soviets or were indifferent to the changes under the communist government. By contrast, Nelofer, Zoya, and Zakia showed their resistance against and disapproval of the Soviets'

transformative agendas. For example, Zakia resisted secular education by teaching the Qur'an and Islamic beliefs to her children, while Nelofer resisted secular education by participating in school protests. Zoya with her mother, who was a member of RAWA, Zoya, at a very young age, distributed pamphlets that contained information on Soviets cruelty toward Afghans, in order to encourage resistance against the oppressor.

Women perceived the Soviets differently. However, all of the women both in the interviews and memoirs expressed a similar viewpoint about the Taliban. They disapproved and rejected the Taliban's radical ideology in regards to both women and the Afghani people at large. The Taliban banned girls and women from education, and prohibited them from working outside the house. They restricted women's freedom of movement and imposed an ultra-conservative form of dress. The women considered the Taliban's edicts in regards to Afghani women oppressive and inhuman. Therefore, they all engaged in some form of resistance, whether by wearing makeup under the burqa or by running underground schools.

Women's geographical location and background influenced their perspectives about the regimes in power. To better understand the background of my informants, I outline the most important aspects of their lives below. The women will be categorized according to the period of time they lived in Afghanistan because their presence and absence influenced their opinion and reactions to the situation. One group of women experienced only the Soviet occupation. A second group lived under the Taliban and a third suffered under both the Soviets and the Taliban.

Women Who Lived under the Soviet Occupation

In her memoir *A Bed of Red Flowers*, Nelofer Pazira describes her life in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion, her escape to Pakistan and eventually to Canada as an immigrant. Most of the story is set during Pazira's childhood and teenage years in Afghanistan. Nelofer was a privileged daughter of a medical doctor and a schoolteacher. The book opens with Nelofer visiting her father in prison; her father was imprisoned for his beliefs and his refusal to joining the communist party. Pazira's describes how the Soviet invasion changed the atmosphere of her country. Soviet secular ideology threatened Afghan society and its deeply traditional religious values. Pazira found herself resisting the oppressive communist regime. The memoir provides a good grasp on the last several turbulent decades of Afghan history.¹¹

In her memoir *Zoya's Story*, Zoya recalls being only three years old when the Soviet army came to Afghanistan. Her parents' homeschooled her, and she spent most of her childhood with her grandmother. Zoya's mother and father were members of resistance movements. Her mother was an active member of RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) and her father also engaged in anti-government movements. Zoya lost both of her parents at a very young age, and her grandmother became her guardian. In 1992, with the help of RAWA, Zoya and her grandmother moved to Pakistan where Zoya stayed and studied at a school.¹²

Both Nelofer and Zoya write about their lives under the Soviets. All of the women whom I interviewed also lived in Afghanistan under the Soviets. Anahita was one of the

¹¹ Nelofer Pazira, *A Bed of Red Flowers* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

¹² Zoya, *Zoya's Story* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2002).

interviewees who favored the Soviets and considered their presence a progress in Afghanistan. Anahita was born in 1961 in the city of Kabul. Anahita belongs to the Pashtun ethnic group, but her parents and grandparents were born in Kabul. Anahita finished high school the same year the Soviets came to Afghanistan. She studied at Kabul University and became a family doctor under the Soviets occupation during which she traveled to Russia few times for conferences and work. In 1994 she moved to Tashkent in Uzbekistan with her family. Anahita came to the United States as a refugee in 2001 and currently resides in San Francisco where she works at the local hospital as an emergency department doctor. Anahita is married with three children.

Similar to Anahita, Alima also supported and favored the communist government in Afghanistan. Alima was born in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1953. She belongs to a minority ethnic group called Bayot, and her family is originally from the Ghazni province. She finished high school in Mazar-e-Sharif and then attended Kabul Polytechnic Institute to obtain her bachelor and master degree in Chemical Engineering. She moved back to Mazar-e-Sharif where she worked for a government office as an engineer.

Rabya considered the Soviet liberal reforms beneficial for Afghani women. However, she neither supported nor opposed the Soviets. Born in 1963 in the capital city, Kabul, Rabya belongs to the Tajik ethnic group, and her family is from the Herat province. She attended school in Kabul until grade 9, and after finishing high school Rabya was sent to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1980. Rabya studied textiles and returned to Afghanistan in 1984. After she received her associate degree, she got married the same year and started working as a textile technician in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Similar to Rabya, Farzana took the middle position in regard to the Soviets. Born in 1966 in the city of Kabul, Farzana belongs to the Tajik ethnic group and spent most of her life in Kabul. After finishing high school, she passed the university entrance exam but was unable to attend because of financial problems. She worked at a blood bank as an accountant for seven years. In 1986, she married and lived in Kabul for the majority of the time, but moved to Mazar-e-Sharif during the Mujahidin fights against the Taliban. Farzana along with her family moved to Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 1997 and then to the United States in 2005.

Unlike the women above, Zakia was the only interviewee who opposed the Soviets and considered their presence a threat to her religion and culture. Born in 1964 in the city of Kandahar, she belongs to the Pashtun ethnic group. Zakia lived in Kandahar until she got married at age 16 and moved to Kabul. She and her family moved back and forth from Kabul to Kandahar. She went to primary and secondary school, but did not obtain a high school diploma since she married at a very young age.

Women Who Lived under the Taliban Rule

Latifa, the author of *My Forbidden Face* was the only woman who lived in Afghanistan for five years under the Taliban regime. Latifa was present under the Soviets, but her memoirs focus on the Taliban regime only. She was sixteen years old when she finished high school in 1996, with a dream of becoming a journalist one day. Unfortunately, her dreams and future shattered when the Taliban took over Kabul in late 1996. Her father owned a small business. Her mother was a retired doctor and her older sister worked for Aryana Airlines as a flight attendant at the time of the Taliban. Latifa, a

lively teenage girl, became a prisoner in her own house. She recalled the frequent edicts of the Taliban that came on every evening on a radio station called Radio Shariah. At the beginning, Latifa and her family were very cautious and followed the edicts given by the Taliban to avoid punishments. But as time passed, Latifa and her family dedicated themselves to helping others. Despite the risk, Latifa's mother treated patients at home, while Latifa's younger brother ventured to get medical supplies. Latifa dedicated herself to educating children from her neighborhood because the Taliban banned girls from school, and boys could only attend madrasas (religious schools). In April of 2001, Latifa with her father and mother escaped to Pakistan and then with the help of *Elle* magazine they flew to Paris for an interview about the plight of Afghani women under the Taliban regime. The book ends with Latifa and her family safely in France. ¹³

Women Who Lived under both Regimes

Zoya, Alima, Rabya, Farzana, and Zakia were all present during both regimes, but some of them left the country during the Taliban rule. Zoya became a member of RAWA, where she first assisted refugees at the camps in Pakistan. Later she traveled to Afghanistan to reach out to Afghani women, to spread the message of RAWA, and gather information about the plight of women under the Taliban. Zoya spent a short amount of time in Afghanistan, but she witnessed and experienced the Taliban brutality. ¹⁴ Unlike Zoya, who spent some time in Afghanistan during the Taliban, Zakia lived in Afghanistan until 2000, when she and her family escaped to Pakistan and in 2003, moved to United States. Alima and Rabya left the country in 1999. Three years after the Taliban

¹³ Latifa, *My Forbidden Face* (New York: Haperion, 2001).

¹⁴ Zoya, *Zoya's Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002).

took over, they moved to Turkmenistan. Farzana lived under the Taliban rule only for few months. She left the country in 1997 and moved to Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

E. A Brief Overview

Chapter 2, “The Two Phases in the History of Afghanistan” deals with the history of the Soviet invasion and the communist agenda to transform Afghanistan into a modern and secular state. The chapter also deals with the Mujahidin and Taliban rule. In this chapter, the emphasis is placed on the regimes’ underlying ideologies and how they affected the country’s infrastructure. Early women’s movements including the creation of RAWA are introduced in this chapter. In chapter 3, “Afghani Women’s Pursuit of Education in Midst of War,” I examine the educational system under the Soviets and the Taliban. Emphasis is placed on the women’s resistance strategies against the Soviets’ secular education and the Taliban’s ban on education for women and girls. In chapter 4, “Female Employment”, I analyze the hidden agenda of the Soviets in regard to female employment. I also analyze the consequences of the Taliban’s ban on female employment. The most important aspect of the chapter is the resistance strategies women engaged in to maintain their autonomy. Chapter 5, “The Veil” deals with women’s veils and clothing in relation to the Soviets and the Taliban regimes. Under the Soviets, the communist government discouraged the wearing of the veil and modest clothing, while the Taliban forced women to wear the *burqa* and restrictive forms of dress. Women’s resistance against liberal clothing and the burqa is stressed in this chapter. In Chapter 6, “Conclusion” I analyze the women’s perspectives and what factors contributed to their

views about the Soviets and the Taliban. Geographical position and women's background contributed to their attitudes and actions.

F. In Conclusion

Afghani women have been under oppression since the Soviets' social and cultural transformation in 1979. The underlying goal of the cultural transformation was to move Afghan society towards modernization through forced secularization. Secularization in the case of Afghani women meant distancing women from their religious and cultural practices, such as veiling, wearing modest forms of clothing, and accessing religious education. For some, the Soviet ideology imposed on women was oppressive according to some women, despite the Soviets' claim that their goal was to liberate women from repressive and archaic practices. Unlike the Soviets, the Taliban oppressed women by prohibiting education and work and enforcing restrictive forms of clothing and the veil. Both regimes sought to take away women's agency. However, Afghani women did not submit to oppression. They participated in movements and actions to fight for their rights. This study will demonstrate that Afghani women did not wait as victims to be saved by people from foreign countries. Women took matters in their own hands and even risked their own lives to protect and preserve their rights and dignity.

CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AFGHANISTAN

The land that is now Afghanistan has a rich and long history. Afghanistan was the crossroad of ancient civilizations due to its strategic location. In the beginning of the twentieth century Afghanistan became independent from Great Britain and developed as a state. Under the royal family, many reforms were introduced to develop Afghanistan into a modern country. The history of Afghanistan did not start with the Soviet invasion in 1979. This chapter will examine the historical background of the Soviet invasion, the Taliban rule and the beginning of women movements as a force of resistance against the Soviets and the Taliban.

Between 1979 and 2001, people lived through two phases of invasion by regimes with foreign and extreme ideologies of thought that contradicted their belief system. More than 90 percent of the populations are followers of Islam, and their beliefs and values are derived from their religion. However, variances in their beliefs are associated with geography and local traditions. The ideological dimensions of the Soviets and the Taliban were not only political but also religious and social, which had a tremendous effect on the way Afghanis lived their everyday life. Therefore, to understand the history of the invasions and the underlying principles of the regimes, it is necessary to capture how deeply culture transformed as a result of the Soviet invasion and Taliban control. According to the historian Haffizullah Emadi, the state is an agent of change in any society. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan wanted to be the agents of change, but the outcomes of the changes were

not positive in these cases.¹⁵ Both the Soviets and the Taliban imposed their ideologies of communism or fundamentalism on the people, and women were affected most of all. The regimes attempted to take away women's agency to decide on religious and social matters in their everyday life. As a result, women participated in various forms of resistance whether it was joining a women's movement or wearing nail polish underneath the burqa.

A. Afghanistan: The Focal Point of Migration, Trade, and Imperial Ambition

The region now known as Afghanistan has been the focal point of migration on the Silk Roads, ancient trade routes that connected the regions of the Asian continent from China to Mediterranean Sea. It connects the East, the West and South, and it has been a constant target by invaders. As discussed in Chapter 1, the Soviet Union was not the first superpower to invade Afghanistan and face defeat. In the first half of nineteenth century, Afghanistan became part of the Anglo-Russian competition known as "The Great Game." According to the historian Amin Saikal "the British supported the Sikhs, and the Russians encouraged and assisted the Persians to move against the Afghans as a part of wider competition between two imperial powers, placing Afghanistan in the midst of intense pressure from powers around it."¹⁶ The interest in Afghanistan was mainly for financial reasons. Afghanistan opened the doors for either the Russian or British markets in Central Asia. Great Britain attempted to invade Afghanistan in 1839 to secure the

¹⁵ Hafizullah Emadi, *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan* (Westport: Praeger Publishers 2002), 59.

¹⁶ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2004), 26.

roads for trade, but they were defeated in the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-1842). Afghan resistance to foreign powers was not confined to the Soviet invasion in 1979. The resistance dated back to the British attempts to colonize Afghan lands in the early nineteenth century. In the second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880), the British gained control of Afghan territories. The Battle of Maiwand in 1880 marks an important part in the history of women's resistance. Malalai of Maiwand is a national Afghan hero, who fought against the British army in the battle of Maiwand. Malalai was killed, but her heroism symbolized her resistance against the oppressors.¹⁷

Ami Abdur Rahman (r.1880-1901) took over the throne after the second Anglo-Afghan war. Under his reign, the Russians and the British established the boundaries of Afghanistan, also known as Durant Line. In 1901, Habibullah Khan (r. 1901-1919) took over the throne after his father's death. He introduced a series of reforms to strengthen the economy and government. His reforms were the first steps towards modernization. They included funding for schools, military academy, newspaper, electricity, and technology from the West. In 1919, Habibullah Khan was assassinated, and his son, Amanullah Khan (r. 1919-1929) became the king. In 1921, the United Kingdom recognized Afghanistan's independence, and in the same year, Afghanistan signed a friendship treaty with the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, led by Vladimir Lenin. The Basic Codes or the constitution was promulgated on April of 1923. According to Amin Saikal, "the Basic Codes were very elaborate in their western-type democratic

¹⁷ Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women: Identity & Invasion* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 3.

disposition, providing for the structure and responsibilities of a constitutional monarchal system.”¹⁸

The modernization process in Afghanistan dates back to King Amanullah Khan, who gained the throne in 1929 after his father was assassinated. According to Andrew Chau, “Although modernization only took center stage after Amanullah’s ascension to the throne, its seeds had been planted decades earlier during the reign of Habibullah Khan, Amanullah’s father and predecessor who ruled from 1901 to 1919.”¹⁹ Habibullah allowed political exiles, who had been banished for their ideology and resistance against Amir Abdur Rahman reign to return. One of the exiles the nationalist and journalist Mahmud Tarzi (1865-1933) whose father was banished from Afghanistan by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (r. 1880-1901). The Young Turk movement in the Ottoman Empire had influenced Tarzi, who envisioned a modern Muslim Afghanistan, where Islam would thrive in a progressive and modern society.²⁰ Mahmud Tarzi inspired the Young Afghan movement and created the Saraj-ol-Akhbar, the first news medium in modern Afghanistan. King Amanullah became very close with Tarzi, and married one of Tarzi’s daughters, future Queen Soraya. According to Astan Olesen,

Tarzi and Young Afghans were thus the first to champion the right of women in Afghanistan, to recognize their abilities, and acknowledge their rights to education and monogamous marriage.²¹

¹⁸ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2004), 79.

¹⁹ Andrew Chau. “The Promise and Failure of King Amanullah’s Modernization Program in Afghanistan,” ANU Undergraduate Research Journal, no. 5 (2013): 36-45.

²⁰ Vartan Gregorian. “Mahmud Tarzi and Saraj-ol-Abkbar,” *Middle Easter Journal* 21, no. 3 (1967): 345-368.

²¹ Astan Olesen, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan* (London: Routledge, 1995), 118.

Tarzi's daughter, Queen Soraya was unlike other queens in the Muslim world at that time. Close to her husband, she was involved in all national events. Queen Soraya campaigned against the veil, against polygamy, and supported girl's education. At a public function, Queen Soraya tore off her veil, and many women at the function followed Queen's example. According to King Amanullah and his wife Queen Soraya, Islam did not require women to veil.²² Along with unveiling, women were encouraged to obtain education, and take part in the building of a modern society. The foundation of social reforms came from the Afghani people themselves. Although, influenced by European thought and technology, Afghani people wanted to modernize Afghanistan within the boundaries of Islam.

Amanullah was chased out of Kabul by a Tajik ruler, Bacha-e Saqao, but Nadir Shah, the General of the Army in the third Anglo-Afghan War killed him and restored the Pashtun kingdom that lasted for six decades. Zahir Shah (1914-2007, r. 1933-1973) took over the throne at the age of nineteen, after the assassination of his father. He undertook a number of economic and social reforms including re-opening girls' schools. He maintained a neutral position in international politics. In 1973, the former Prime Minister, Mohammad Daoud Khan staged a coup d'etat and established a republican government overthrowing his cousin, Zahir Shah, who was in Italy at the time.

²² Jennifer Heath, *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 2008), 275.

B. Afghanistan's Two Party Communism

The communist party with the help of the Soviet Union ruled Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. Afghanistan was a traditional and conservative country, where religion was the only factor that united people from different ethnic groups. Surprisingly, for tribal groups, the communist system developed under Stalin was much closer than western capitalism. Abdul Rahman Mahmudi (1909-1964) was one of the first figures that could be identified as a communist in Afghanistan. In 1951, he created a leftist Dari/Pashto newspaper called the *Voices of Masses* [*Nida-yi Khalq*]. Abdul Rahman was arrested and imprisoned for his communist tendencies under King Mohammad Zahir Shah; he died shortly after he was released from prison in 1963.

Nur Muhammad Taraki (1917-1991) and Babrak Karmal (1929-1996) led two rival factions in Afghanistan's communist movement. The future leader of the Khalq (People) faction, Nur Muhammad Taraki was born in Ghazni province in 1917 to a Pashtun family. Growing up, he worked as a clerk for a company that traded dried fruit in Bombay, India, where he also attended night school. Upon his return from India in 1937, he started his studies at a Kabul college where he obtained a degree in law and political science. Taraki secured a position with the Ministry of Education, but at the end of 1940s, he was fired for misusing the government's funds. He joined the Press Department, where he began his writing career. Taraki popularized classical Russian and Soviet literature. In 1953, Taraki worked for a few months in Washington as a press and cultural advisor for the Afghan embassy. In 1956, Taraki was hired by the American

embassy in Kabul as an English translator. Taraki began organizing the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1965.²³

Taraki's rival and the future leader of the Parcham (Flag) faction, Babrak Karmal was born in 1929 in Kabul to the family of an army officer. He attended a German language high school, where a German-speaking teacher who favored Hitler influenced him. Babrak became a member of the student union at the University of Kabul, without being a student. Imprisoned in 1953 for his radical political views, he was released from the prison in 1956. Around this time, he adopted the pseudonym Karmal (friend of labor). He obtained his degree in law and politics from Kabul University in 1960. Karmal worked for the Minister of Education until 1964, when he left his job to participate in the full-time political opposition against the government.

The historian Anthony Arnold stated that "although their careers possess various features in common, Babrak and Taraki each represented a fundamentally different Afghan constituency, and it is in this difference that the origins of Afghanistan's unique two-party communism are to be found."²⁴ Taraki came from a Pashtun family; historically, Pashtuns are the conservative ethnic group in Afghanistan. Taraki believed that women belonged in the home and all of his followers were men. On the other hand, Karmal, though claiming Pashtun nationality, spoke Dari as his first language. Karmal was "progressive" and welcomed women to his council. Anaita Ratebzada (b. 1931) was Karmal's mistress who arose to the position of Minister of Education under the Soviets.

²³ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2004), 184.

²⁴ Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan's Two Party Communism: Parcham and Khalq* (Stanford: Hoover Press Publication, 1983), 21.

The PDPA was established in 1965; Taraki was the secretary of the central committee and Babrak Kamal became the first secretary of deputy. The PDPA was established as a progressive democratic party; however, after 1978 the party openly became Marxist with Leninist tendencies. The PDPA concentrated on recruiting highly educated people. Teachers were the main targeted groups by the PDPA. The party's second targeted group was the military. In 1967, ethnic, linguist, and social divisions split the PDPA into two factions. Khalq (People) led by Nur Mohammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin (1929-1979) was dominated by Pashto speaking Afghans. Parcham (Flag), the other faction was led by Babrak Karmal and dominated by Dari speaking Afghans. The PDPA began a series of radical social reforms. Most of the reforms focused on anti-religious and anticlerical society, progress in education, and women's rights. The radical reforms coupled with anti-religious propaganda provoked Islamic opposition.²⁵

The Soviets forced the parties to come together. In July 1975, the Parcham and Khalq held their first reconciliation meeting since their split in 1967. Both groups united in their opposition against Mohamamd Daoud Khan and their allegiance to Moscow. In 1973, General Sardar Mohammed Daoud Khan (1909- 1978 r. 1973-1978) overthrew his cousin, Muhammed Zahir Khah (1914-2007, r. 1933-1973) and proclaimed Afghanistan a republic. Five years later, in April 1978, the PDPA overthrew and assassinated Mohammad Daoud Khan. The PDPA celebrated these events as Great Saur (April) Revolution. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was to help the PDPA to keep

²⁵ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2004), 165-169.

power and continue its cultural and religious reforms. The PDPA had a program of modernization to their understanding. “The Khalqis favored a violent overthrow of the existing system, leading to a quick and complete victory for Marxism-Leninism. The Parchamis were more gradualist in their approach to building communism and willing to cooperate with a none-communist.”²⁶ Since the Khalqis were most active, Taraki became the first prime minister, but Haffizullah Amin succeeded in March 1979. It was under Haffizullah Amin’s presidency when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December of 1979. According to Rogers, “the Soviet leaders claimed repeatedly that the Afghan government had made requests for Soviet military assistance to which Moscow responded as an international duty.”²⁷ Haffizullah Amin was executed a few days after the Soviet deployed over 50,000 troops to Afghanistan, therefore raising the question of whether the Soviet were really invited as they claimed.²⁸ Some believed that Soviets killed Haffizulah Amin because he resisted the Soviet army in Afghanistan, which created a reasonable doubt among people about the PDPA government and the Soviets. Babrak Karmal was the president of Afghanistan from 1979 until 1986. In an interview Babrak, stated, “We are independent, Afghanistan is non-aligned country.” He further stated, “But we support the general policy of the Soviet Union against colonialism, imperialism, racism and fascism and discrimination.”²⁹ Babrak argued that the PDPA

²⁶ Tom Rogers, *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Westport: Greenwood Press 1992), 17.

²⁷ Tom Rogers, *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*.

²⁸ Grant Farr, John Marriam, *Afghan Resistance: The Politics of Survival* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987).

²⁹ Babrak Karmal. Interview in English https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guj2DVBzq_Y.

supported the Soviets due to its policy of peace, freedom, nation independence and social progress.

Cultural and Religious Transformation

The cultural and religious reforms in Afghanistan were not new ideas developed by the PDPA or the Soviet Union. Before the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, the leaders of Afghanistan made a tremendous effort to modernize and reform Afghani society. With the help of the Soviet Union, cultural and religious transformations became feasible. Although the Islamist opposition grew, the Soviet military was able to control the uprising and protest by the people who opposed the reforms of equal rights, land reform and modernization of Afghanistan through secularization. Secularization has various meanings and determining the meaning requires analysis of the context and history. In the case of Afghanistan, secularization did not necessarily mean disbelief in a higher entity. Secularism in the context and the history of Afghanistan meant separating religion from the public sphere.

For centuries Afghani women have suffered under traditional patriarchal oppression. In the nineteenth century, Afghani women experienced a tremendous shift their role in society. One of the main reforms of the PDPA was gender equality, which ensured women more freedom, education and work opportunities. Women gained many rights in the decade of Soviet rule. Their traditional identity as housewives and mothers changed over time. Women became involved in all sectors from health care to government. Those living in rural areas took advantage of the free education as well as professional work outside of the house. Secular education replaced religious education;

women and men were taught Soviet ideology and philosophy. With educational and professional opportunities, women were also required to dress a certain way to embody modernity and leave behind archaic traditions and religion.

Both men and women experienced the impact of Soviets social transformation. The physical appearance of women was altered. The veil is a symbol of piety and modesty in Islam, some Muslim women veil to observe God's command, but others veil to construct their identity. Leila Ahmad in her book *A Quiet Revolution: A Veil Resurgence from Middle East to America*, states, "the veil gathered a range of new meanings in the past few decades: from an expression of personal faith, solidarity with Palestine, Chechnya or Iraq or allegiance to the Ummah, to a safeguard against sexual harassment, a fashion statement, a critique of western "sexism", a call for minority rights, and an evangelical tool."³⁰ For the Soviets and PDPA, the veil meant oppression and a symbol of backwardness that needed to be removed in order for women to be equal to men in the society.³¹ The interviewees and the women in the memoirs had different perspectives on the veil in the Soviet period, but most of them did not view it as a symbol of oppression. Most of the informants viewed the veil a personal choice rather than a religious obligation. The Soviets presence on Afghan soil not only altered the political landscape of the country, but also left imprints on the people's way of life.

³⁰ Leila Ahmad, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil Resurgence, from Middle East to America* (New Heaven: Yale University Press 2001).

³¹ Elizabeth Fernia. *A Veiled Revolution*, (New York: Icarus Films, 1982).

The Mujahidin

The word ‘mujahidin’ comes from the Arabic word jihad from root word, ‘jahd’, which means ‘self-struggle’. Therefore, mujahid is a person who fights or struggles. The Mujahidin was not a new phenomenon in the 1970s and 1980s, because they opposed the British rule in the 19th century. Babrak Karmal in an interview stated that the Mujahidin were created by the Reagan administration. “They are anti-revolution bandits.”³² The Mujahidin who fought against the Soviet invasion came from diverse ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Uzbeks, and Tajiks. Most of the Mujahidin factions were Sunni Muslims. However, some were Shia sponsored by Iran. The British historian, Peter Marsden notes,

A key element in a consideration of the mujahidin movements is the extent to which the parties that were seen to represent it were in fact representative. To take this forward, one needs to be clear about definitions. At the very least, one can say that all the Afghans who took up arms against the PDPA and the Soviets forces, who regarded themselves as engaged in a jihad, were, in the true sense, Mujahidin, or fighters in a holy war. The fighters found their own leaders at the local level and some of them rose to prominence.³³

In addition to Afghan Mujahidin, people from other Muslim countries volunteered. One of the prominent figures was Osama bin Laden (1957-2011), who came from Saudi Arabia to join the Mujahidin and fight against the Soviets. The Soviets were officially atheists, and many devout Muslims regarded them as detrimental to the world of Islam. The mountainous terrains of Afghanistan and the ethnic and linguistic differences among the Mujahidin faction made it difficult for the groups to cooperate. However, by 1985

³² “Babrak Karmal. Interview in English (www.esalat.org),” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guj2DVBzq_Y 3/15/2017.

³³ Peter Marsden. *The Taliban* (London: Zed Books Ltd 1998), 27.

cooperation between the resistance groups had improved, and a network of alliance was created. It was called the Seven Party Mujahidin Alliance or Peshawar Seven. One of the prominent commanders was Ahmed Shah Massoud (1956-2001), who was assassinated by the Taliban in 2001. Ahmed Shah Massoud's banner was Jamiate-e-Islami, one of the seven Mujahidin parties led by Burhanuddin Rabbani (b. 1940), who became the President after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The financial and military support of the Mujahidin by the Pakistani government, as well as Saudi Arabia, China and United States contributed to the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. By 1989, The Soviets had lost 15,000 troops, and more than 500,000 troops had suffered injury by 1989. The Afghan-Soviet war lasted for a decade. For USSR, it was a costly mistake that some historians claim to be a major factor in the collapse of the Soviet Union several years later.³⁴ The victory of the Mujahidin was bittersweet, because more than one million Afghans lost their lives and five million people were displaced. The political chaos between the Mujahidin factions allowed the Taliban to take control of Afghanistan's capital city in 1996.

C. The Taliban

The Taliban is a fundamentalist militant movement that took control of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2011. The Taliban emerged as a resistance movement against the Soviet invasion in 1979. The Taliban were one of the factions of the Mujahidin (freedom fighters). Although several Mujahidin groups fought the Soviets, the Taliban were the only group supported by both the Pakistan's and the US governments against the

³⁴ Hafizullah Emadi, *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan* (Westport: Praeger Publishers 2002), 123.

Soviets. In 1994, Pakistan chose the Taliban to guard a convoy. Pakistan's government aimed to create a trade route from Pakistan to other countries in Central Asia. The Pakistani government provided both military and financial support to the Taliban, which enabled the group to capture Afghanistan's cities and take over Kabul in 1996. The Taliban are ethnically Sunni Pashtuns, and they have religious and ethnic bonds with Pakistan. Most of the leaders were educated in the refugee camps in Pakistan, where they received both religious and military education. The Afghani Taliban members were boys and men displaced under the Soviets. The Afghanis who joined the Taliban were victims of the Soviet invasion, but they later became the victimizers of the Afghani people. The Soviets contributed this to the emergence of this extremist group. The Taliban emergence and control of Afghanistan is not referred to as invasion, since the Taliban members were Afghans themselves. However, to Afghani people, the Taliban control was an invasion, because Pakistan, the United States, and Saudi Arabia perpetuated it.

The Taliban Assault

The Taliban first came to the world's notice in 1994. They seemed to emerge out of nowhere. The Taliban's first appearance was a battle fought for a convoy, which was sent from Pakistan to Turkmenistan. However, after they defeated the army, the Taliban moved to Kandahar and took over the city without any resistance. Kandahar was under attack by Mujahidin groups for almost two years. When the Taliban took over the population was forced to surrender their weapons and cooperate with the new authority. With the control of Kandahar, the Taliban issued their first decree, in which they "required men to wear turbans, beards, short hair and salware kameez and women to wear

burqa, a garment that covers the entire body.”³⁵ As days passed more and more decrees were issued. Women were banned from work and school. Music, games, and television were outlawed in order to control what people saw and heard.

Once they had succeeded in bringing order to Kandahar, the Taliban, under the leadership of Mullah Mohammad Omar (1960-2013) managed to conquer the rest of Afghanistan and enforce their interpretation of the Qur’an on the whole country. Over the winter of 1994-95, they reached the hilltops overlooking Kabul, and captured the Charasayb, its southern part. Their occupation was short lived. After a month the government’s troops were able to retake the area. The winter of 1995-96 was very harsh on the people living in Kabul, because of the Taliban surrounding the city, which resulted in fuel and food shortage. In September 1996, the Taliban took Kabul. The Taliban seized the last Afghan president Mohammad Najibullah (1947-1996) along with his brother from the United Nation’s compound and hanged them in the football stadium. Latifa recalled these events in her memoir. According to Latifa, the Taliban considered Najibullah an infidel and hanged him to teach others a lesson.

The Taliban Policies

Islam is the dominant religion in Afghanistan, and religion plays a vital role in Afghani people’s lives. Both the Mujahidin and the Taliban used religion as their driving force. The Soviet withdrawal, the loss of millions of lives, and the destruction of the country were all done under the name of Islam. The Taliban leaders and members were taught in madrasas (religious schools) in the refugee camps in Pakistan, where they were

³⁵ Peter Marsden, *The Taliban* (London: Zed Book, 1998), 46.

exposed to radicalization. The radicalization was not only among men, but children from a young age were recruited from the orphanages and forced to join the Taliban. The Taliban members enforced what they were taught by their leaders (such as Mullah Omar, and Osama bin Laden). The orders that were issued by the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, were as outrageous as their treatment of people. The Taliban introduced a new image of Islam to the rest of the world. The Qur'an was used to issue the orders to the public, and those who resisted were punished publicly to spread fear and encouraged obedience and cooperation with the Taliban. Zaeef was a former member of the Taliban who wrote a memoir called *My Life with the Taliban*. Zaeef claimed that,

Most of the Mujahedeen fronts were very homogeneous, with most people coming from the same background, same tribe, same family, or from the same area. The Taliban were different. A group of religious scholars and students with different backgrounds, they transcended the normal coalitions and factions. They were fighting out of their deep religious belief in jihad and their faith in God. Allah was their only reason for being there, unlike other mujahedeen who fought for money and land.³⁶

The Taliban enforced strict interpretation of Sharia (religious law derived from the Qur'an and hadiths). Some areas had harsher rules than others. Kabul was one of the cities where strict rules were reinforced, because Kabul was the most liberal region of the country, due to the communist influence. The rural regions were not affected as much, because people were already conservative and observed Sharia laws prior to the Taliban. The Taliban forbade women and girls from working outside the home or attending schools. Outside their families, women over the age of puberty were not allowed to talk to members of the opposite sex. When venturing outside the home, women had to wear a burqa and be accompanied by male relative. The Taliban also required men to grow

³⁶ Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 22.

beards, pray five times a day in the mosque, and wear a turban along with salwar kameez (traditional pantaloons and body shirt). According to Zaeef, a former Taliban member, life in the city was returning to normality because, “women were no longer working in government departments and the men throughout the city had started to grow beards.”³⁷ The Taliban prohibited music, television, and other media. Also, all images and statues were destroyed, because they were deemed offensive to Islam. One example is their destruction of Buddha statues in Bamiyan province in 2001. The Taliban’s interpretation of the Qur’an, sentenced to death those who were accused of adultery, and the punishment was stoning to death. The Taliban enforced stoning, but it important to mention that stoning is not a form of punishment for adulterers in the Qur’an; it is only in the Hadith. Furthermore, people who were caught stealing were subject to harsh punishment. Their punishment included public amputation of arms so the person could not steal in the future. The Taliban conducted house-to-house searches, to insure that people followed the policies. The reign of terror of left no choice for people but to conform to Mullah Mohammad Omar’s extreme policies.

D. Voices of Resistance

Afghanistan is a traditional and religious country; therefore gender roles are clearly marked in Afghani society. Afghani women had a difficult road to getting their liberty in the society where men are considered superior to women in status. In the past four decades, Afghanistan has been under the rule of different political ideologies, Soviet’s communism from 1979-1989 and the Taliban’s fundamentalism from 1996-

³⁷ Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*.

2011. Both the Soviet Union and the Taliban oppressed women in one way or another. Under the Soviet Union and the Taliban rule, women resisted the oppression in various ways, contrary to the common belief that Afghani women lacked agency and passively accepted the oppression. Martin Luther King in his speech “Three Ways of Meeting Oppression,”³⁸ explains that oppression is dealt with in three ways by the oppressed. The first way is acquiescence, which means that people adjust themselves to oppression and they become conditioned to it. The second way to resist oppression is through violence and the third way is non-violent resistance. In the case of Afghani women both patterns of resistance were evident, but most of the women engaged in non-violent resistance against the Soviets and the Taliban. According to the sociologist Rostami-Povey, Afghani women “in their own way and according to their own culture, religion and ethnicity, have been resisting the social control that the family, the community try to impose on them”³⁹. Despite the difficult conditions of life under the Soviet Union and the Taliban regimes, Afghani women found a space to exercise autonomy and agency. After the United States took control of Afghanistan in 2001 more and more Afghani women came forward to tell their life stories of resistance.

Women’s Movements

The history of Afghanistan reflects its patriarchal nature. Mostly men and their actions are recorded in history, which leaves women without a space. Women’s role in Afghanistan’s history is a work in progress. Nevertheless women have played an

³⁸ Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper 1958) 28.

³⁹ Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women: Identity & Invasion* (London: Zed books 2007), 3.

influential and significant role. Women's contribution in building Afghani society has not been well documented, but Afghani women risked their lives to defend their country from invaders, and to educate the next generation of both men and women. The constitution of 1923 gave women equal rights; relatively speaking, women had agency and autonomy under that constitution. The Afghani people had a progressive attitude toward women, but the Soviet invasion and the emergence of the Taliban changed the course of history. The most prominent women's movement in the years leading to the Soviet invasion was the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). Meena Keshwar Kamal along with group of Afghani women founded the organization, and it was officially established in 1977. Kamal and her supporters began anti-Soviet campaigns immediately after the Soviet invasion. Payam-e-Zan (Message of Women) magazine was launched by RAWA in 1981. Along with organization's political movements, RAWA also built schools, hospitals, and handcraft centers for women who were displaced in Pakistan. RAWA's mission is to acquire human rights for women. The fundamental principle underlying RAWA's vision is democratic and secular principles, in which women are considered equal to men. Faegheh Sherazi explains,

In contemporary Afghanistan, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) is steadfastly working to expose crimes of violence. Again, during the Taliban reign, members of RAWA risked their lives to secretly film violence perpetrated against women by the Taliban and then disseminated this information to the outside world. RAWA continues to provide shelter, vocational training, and education to homeless women and prostitutes in Heart, Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Jalalabad.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Faegheh Sherazi, *Velvet Jihad: Muslim Women's Quiet Resistance to Islamic Fundamentalism* (Tampa: University Press of Florida 2009), 100.

The main base of the organization was moved from Kabul to Pakistan in early 1980's. However, most of the fieldwork and evidence gathering by RAWA members were conducted in Afghanistan during the Soviet Union and the Taliban rule. A memoir written by one of the RAWA members is *Zoya's Story* by Zoya , which gives details about the work of RAWA and the risks associated with it.⁴¹

Small Acts of Resistance

The courage, determination and ingenuity of Afghani women were transformative elements of the women's conditions in the patriarchal society that viewed women inferior to men and treated them as property that could be sold and purchased. Oppression of women is not a new phenomenon in Afghanistan or any other part of the world. Women in the United States received the right to vote in the same decade as women in Afghanistan, but Afghanistan's government as a state failed to preserve the rights promised to women, whereas the United States moved toward progress and made a monumental change in its system. Thus, women participated in actions that showed resistance to the condition of being submissive and passive, their small acts of resistance can be analyzed both from the history and the memoirs, written by Afghani women. Being part of a women's organization like RAWA was not an option for all Afghani women, therefore they sought alternatives. For example, women resisted the Taliban by wearing lot of makeup underneath the burqa. They went to secret salons, and they sang and danced at parties. The women I interviewed had one aspect in common; they never gave up on life, despite the fact that their lives were in danger most of the time.

⁴¹ Zoya, *Zoya's Story* ((New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002).

E. In Conclusion

The Soviet ideology was foreign to the Afghani people. The modernization of Afghanistan through atheistic Marxism-Leninism proved to be a failure, because most Afghans favored their own strict religious tradition. However, the PDPA government gained political power thanks to the support of those Afghans who embraced secularism and were ready for a change. As a result of Soviet invasion the Afghani people divided into four groups; the first supported the PDPA government and embraced Marxism-Leninism: the second group embraced a more liberal secularism, but not the form of secularism promoted under the communism where religion did not have a space, the third group neither embraced nor rejected the new government; and the fourth group rejected communism and secularism and resisted the PDPA government. The same is true about the fundamentalist ideology brought by the Taliban. During the reign of the Taliban, people were divided into two major groups: the first group became accustomed to the oppression, but the second group rejected the Taliban's radical interpretation of Sharia and struggled for their rights as Muslim and human beings. The memoirs are from women who resisted the political regimes in power.

CHAPTER 3

AFGHANI WOMEN'S PURSUIT OF EDUCATION IN THE MIDST OF WAR

Education is the single most critical element in preventing poverty, empowering women and promoting human rights. The people of Afghanistan recognize the power of education, and educational reforms in Afghanistan began earlier than in some other undeveloped countries. For example, the national reformist Mahmud Tarzi with the support of King Amanullah in the 1920's initiated the education reforms that created schools not only for men, but women as well. Queen Soraya established the first school for girls in the early 1920s. Just like other reforms, educational reforms had a history before the Soviet invasion. However, this chapter will focus on the Soviet and Taliban impact on Afghani women's education and it will shed light on how Afghani women's voices of resistance became agents of change in difficult times.

Despite modernization, Afghani women's way of life remained in the shadow of the past. Male domination, local tradition and geopolitical forces constituted the main factors of oppression for Afghani women, and, as a result, education and social advancement in Afghani society remained a constant struggle for them. Education became the basis for women to question and fight authority. Women from all walks of life actively participated in liberating and empowering women, even risking their lives. The memoirs and my fieldwork will demonstrate the various ways Afghani women fought for their freedom before the rest of the world rushed to save them. Although many Afghani people accepted oppression from the Soviet Union and the Taliban, others collectively participated in resisting and bringing change to their conditions.

A. Public vs Religious Education

Every culture and religion emphasize the importance of education and seeking knowledge to empower oneself as a human being. Islam as a system of belief highlights the crucial role in acquiring knowledge, which is necessary for all Muslims to reach iman (faith) and become true believers. For instance, verse 96:1 of Qur'an states, "Read! In the name of your Lord who has created (all that exists)."⁴² This verse along with many other verses and hadiths emphasizes knowledge being an obligation for both men and women. In Islam, knowledge can be separated into two types, religious education and general education required by a society. While religious knowledge is required to be closer to God, general knowledge is required for the betterment of society. In Islamic societies, education sometimes is not given the attention it deserves, and misinterpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith can contribute to the lack of education in a country such as Afghanistan.

King Habibuallah Khan (r.1901-1919) established the first public schools in the twentieth century in Afghanistan. At first, they were available for only the male elites of the country. However, the majority of educational reforms were implemented after World War II. The national reformist, Mahmud Tarzi, introduced an educationally system influenced by Europe. The constitution of 1948 made primary education mandatory for every boy and girl. The basic principles of Islam were taught in primary and secondary schools. Pashto and Dari were primary languages depending on the region of the country. According to the historian Samady,

In the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, the Ministers of Education and many of the key senior officials were Afghan specialists in social or

⁴² Yusuf Ali, Qur'an, 96:1.

natural sciences or education, who had completed their secondary education in Kabul and were trained in western universities. These leaders in education adopted, within the context of national values and culture, a European style of education with regard to curricula, examinations and school regulations (in fact, French and German teachers were involved in two secondary schools in Kabul from the early 1920s).⁴³

Public education was flourishing at a steady pace. Most of the subjects including science and math were taught in schools. The dominant foreign language was English. Before the introduction of public education, religious education was common in Afghanistan. The religious schools in the Muslim majority countries are called madrasa. The literal meaning of madrasa is school. Madrasas are schools, where students learn the Qur'an and the hadith. In addition to their native language, students also learn Arabic. Some madrasas offered classes in Islamic ethics, to connect children to their community of faith.

B. Education under the Soviets

Equal educational opportunity for men and women was one of the biggest attainments of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The number of women enrolled in schools and institutions of higher education increased between 1979 and 1989.

In close collaboration with the Soviet political and education advisers, the government formulated an education policy, which (a) conformed to the country's political objectives and agenda and (b) adapted the education system to the Soviet model of education in order to facilitate closer collaboration in education and training.⁴⁴

⁴³ Saif Samady, *Education and Afghan Society in the Twentieth Century* (France: UNESCO, 2001), 23.

⁴⁴ Samady, *Education and Afghan Society in the Twentieth Century*, 70.

The PDPA government built schools and learning facilities to accommodate men and women from rural areas of the country, where literacy rates were not high for both genders. One of the biggest changes in the educational system modeled after the Soviets was the introduction of the Russian language as the only foreign language, and the implementation of the “Fundamentals of Social Sciences’ in secondary schools.

According to the UNESCO statistical yearbook of 1999, the number of girls in secondary schools increased from 11% to 32%,⁴⁵ although the number of female students continued to be smaller compared to the number of males. Nevertheless, the numbers increased rapidly under Soviet advisement. Besides general public education, major literacy programs were implemented to provide courses to out-of-school children, and women without education and work experience. The courses not only covered basic literacy, but also topics on home economics, childcare, healthcare, clothing, and family planning. The government sent those who succeeded in school to one of the Soviet ruled republics to further their education. Not everyone welcomed the literacy campaigns, especially men from the rural parts of the country. To the tribal men, women were their property. The mixing of the sexes in co-educational classroom challenged patriarchal authority.

According to writer Deborah Ellis, “the men in the community became furious with what they saw as a direct threat to their authority and their property over the women.”⁴⁶ The transformation was swift, which resulted in an uprising against the government and the Soviet army. The accessibility of education was seen as a way to change the traditional way of life. People divided into two groups due to their political beliefs: the first group

⁴⁵ Saif Samady, *Education and Afghan Society in the Twentieth Century* (France: UNESCO, 2001), 64.

⁴⁶ Deborah Eliss, *Women of the Afghan War* (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 128.

supported the Soviet's cultural transformation including secular education and prohibition of religious education in schools, while the second group considered the Soviet education system degrading and damaging to Afghani society.

System of Education in the Soviet Era

The Soviet literacy campaigns were one of the most innovative and successful efforts to modernize the country. Most of the women I interviewed were enthusiastic about the new educational opportunities offered to them by the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. They were happy to be able to receive the same education as men, since previously education was not widely available to them. They were eager to go to school and to share their new knowledge. When asked, "What do you think about the system of education promoted by the Soviet Union? How was it different from the previous educational system?" They answered as follows:

Rabya:

There were no major differences between the Soviet and previous system of education. The entrance exam was eliminated from schools. The education system became more accessible and better for women.⁴⁷

Alima:

A lot of schools were established, the education system changed from 12 grades to 10 grades only. In the primary schools, Russian became an official language. The number of higher education institutions increased. For the first time the University of Social Sciences was established in Kabul. More girls were enrolled in school and more women were in the universities than previously.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

⁴⁸ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

Farzana:

Before the Soviet army came to Afghanistan, the government was already making an effort to build schools and enroll more children in school, but after 1979 the process became faster and many schools were established and the Russians changed the curriculum of the school, adding the Russian language as a required subject in public schools. I think a lot of people received education because of the Soviet Union and that is the only thing that I think they did good for the Afghani people.⁴⁹

Zakia:

In the village where we lived there was only one school for girls and it did not have enough resources to accommodate all the girls in the village. There were two separate sessions of school, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Children had to bring their own pencils and notebooks and the teachers were not educated well. When the Soviets came there were more schools built in my village. When I left my village and moved to Kabul, a lot of girls were going to school and there were schools close to their homes and the teachers were better. Also more subjects were taught in schools than in my village. For example, they taught the Russian language when the Soviets came.⁵⁰

Anahita:

I was in the second year of my medical studies when the Soviet army came to Afghanistan. A few years after the Soviets arrived, there were major changes in Afghani society, especially education. Everyone was encouraged to go to school and be literate. Although the education was getting better before the Soviets came, it became even better and more girls and boys were enrolled in schools. One of the biggest changes was that girls and boys were joined in the classrooms and the universities accepted more women. I personally believe that the education system of the Soviets brought a lot of benefits to Afghani society where education was not very important for people, especially for the people living in the countryside.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

⁵⁰ Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

⁵¹ Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

A common pattern can be described from these testimonies. All my informants had a positive experience with the system of education introduced by the Soviets. For Rabya, there was no evidence of change. She believed that Soviets continued the reforms. The Soviets built on the existing educational system, but made it “better” and many people “benefited” from the accessibility of education. Zakia stated that more schools were built in rural areas, and children did not have to travel far to obtain education. Local access to education was helpful to those who did not have the opportunity to send their children to another village or big cities to study. Furthermore, all women agreed that the government before the Soviets actively promoted literacy and encouraged all men and women to obtain education. The difference was that Soviet presence accelerated an earlier process but certainly did not initiate it. The accessibility and quality of education in rural areas as described by Zakia constituted progress. As some Afghans embraced the change and new educational opportunities, others had a different viewpoint regarding the rapid transformation of Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion. Nelofer Pazira attended secondary school during the Soviet years, and in her memoir she complains that the leaders in her school embraced the communist ideology and through education tried to pass this onto the new generation of Afghani girls and boys. Nelofer Pazira described education as,

Amanullah Khan may have had a dream about Afghan women’s education when he established a school for girls. But girls’ schools are now little more than showcases for the communist government, which has adopted heroines such as Malalai as national symbols of Afghan progress, but has done little to help the women.⁵²

⁵² Nelofer Pazira, *A Bed of Red Flowers* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 145.

Malalai of Maiwand was an Afghan heroine, who fought during the second Anglo-Afghan war. She was responsible for the victory of Battle of Maiwand in 1880 and was martyred. School programs turned Malalai into a symbol of Afghani woman's resistance against the occupation and a school was even established in her name in Kabul. Malalai's story is sldo mentioned in the Nelofer and Latifa's memoirs. The discrepancies between the women who lived during the Soviet portrayed the deceitful nature of a divided nation. Nelofer describes the system of education during the Soviets as a pretentious display of erroneous progress to show to the world that the Soviet army in Afghanistan was helping people to develop and progress. According to Zoya "the subjects were all taught according to the guidelines laid down by the puppet regime, and many of the books given to the children were translations of Russian textbooks. My parents thought that children learned more about Russia than Afghanistan."⁵³ Nelofer and Zoya described the educational system under the Soviets as oppressive, because they believed that people were forced to submit to the will of the invaders. As I show below my informants were more divided about their evaluation of the Soviet educational reforms.

Voices of Resistance

Violence against women constitutes a global human rights violation that is widespread around the world, irrespective of religious, social and economic factors. Eradicating violence against women has been the goal of many NGO's and women's organizations. However, the issue still continues to have a profound effect on women's

⁵³ Zoya. *Zoya's Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 40.

basic human rights. It can be argued that women in Afghanistan suffered tremendously from the violence inflicted on them by continuous wars in the country. Violence and oppression are factors that trigger resistance against the oppressor; the resistance strategies were silent, non-violent and violent. All five women in my interviews had their own unique opinions on the oppression of women under the Soviet Union and the ways they resisted or did not resist. Also, Nelofer's and Zoya's personal experiences represented the different types of resistance that women engaged in. When asked, "What have you done to resist the secular education enforced and promoted in schools and universities?" They answered as follows:

Rabya:

I don't think the Soviet Union enforced secular education, I did not do anything to resist and I was in favor of education for women.⁵⁴

Alima:

I did not resist the Soviet army, because it was all positive and the education provided with the help of the Soviets actually helped our people, especially women.⁵⁵

Farzana:

I did not resist the secular education enforced in schools and universities, because I believed that education is good for Afghani women even if they learned about things that were seen as bad in our culture.⁵⁶

Zakia:

I had my first daughter in 1982 and when she was growing up, I taught her how to read the Qur'an. When she started going to school in 1988, I would

⁵⁴ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

⁵⁵ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

⁵⁶ Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

always teach her about religious things that were not taught in schools anymore in Kabul. I think mostly teaching my children about their background and beliefs were my way of resistance and other women resisted the secular education the same way.⁵⁷

Anahita:

Personally I did not resist the education provided by the government at that time, because the education helped me to achieve my goals and I believe it did the same thing for others. The women who resisted usually helped the Mujahidin or they did not send their children to public school.⁵⁸

Many of my participants did not engage in acts of resistance against the system of education enforced by the Soviets. The benefits they received from it positively affected their role and status in society and it was a continuation of pre-Soviet educational reforms. The only woman who stated that she resisted secular education was Zakia, through teaching her children religious education. Zakia still allowed children to attend school, since she valued education. However, religion and culture were also important to her. Anahita added that families did not send their children to school to prevent them from being corrupted by its secular teachers. Consequently, children remained illiterate or had very basic literacy skills. Similarly, Zoya's parents did not allow their daughter to attend public school, but contrary to other parents, they chose to educate her at home. This was their way of resisting secularization. Many Afghani people argue that it was not the best way of resisting, but their dissidence showed courage and power to stand for one's values. Contrary to Zoya's parents or Zakia, Nolefer resisted explicitly and in some instances engaged in violent resistance against the school employees and against the Soviet army. Nolefer along with a group of friends participated in violent protests after school, which included throwing stones at the Soviet soldiers.

⁵⁷ Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

⁵⁸ Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

The examination of the history of secular education in Afghanistan under the Soviets along with the life experiences of women who lived through their times shows a deeply divided society. Political and religious views differed from person to person. Every Afghani woman's experience was unique and each response to secular education depended on the level of conservatism within each family. Two broad groups of women can be identified: one who favored the system of education because of its benefits they had gained new knowledge that was hardly accessible to them before, and the other who criticized it for reshaping the culture and religion of Afghanistan along communist lines.

C. Education under the Taliban Regime

Immediately after taking over the cities, the Taliban enforced their interpretation of Islamic Law (sharia), which differed from the rest of the Islamic world by its harshness and ultra-conservatism. Everyone suffered under the Taliban, but especially women and girls. They were the primary targets of the Taliban who marginalized them by issuing decrees that curtailed their freedom of movement and restricted their access to education and work. Women were now excluded from the public life and became essentially invisible. If they dared to disobey, they could be beaten, killed, flogged, stoned, and raped.

Banned from School

Under the Taliban rule, women and girls were essentially denied basic human. The ban on education was one of the most devastating blows that Afghani girls and women had to endure. Education for girls was limited up to age eight and the only type of

education that was allowed was learning the Qur'an. According to the sociologist Rosemarie Skaine, "In January 2000, UNICEF reported that 90 percent of the girls in Afghanistan and 75 percent of the boys were not attending school in Taliban-controlled areas."⁵⁹ The illiteracy rates increased as a result of the ban on education. When asked, "Describe Taliban's view on women's education? How did it impact you or other girls and women you knew?" They responded as follows:

Rabya:

When the Taliban took over Kabul I was living in Mazar-e-Sharif, and I heard a lot of bad stories about how Taliban treated women. I heard that girls and women were not allowed to attend school and university. I lived in Mazar under Taliban rule for nine months, and those nine months were the worst time of my life. All the women and girls in my family stopped going to school because they would get punished for it. Even boys were not allowed to go to school. Because of the Taliban all my three sons did not attend school for almost a year. We would hide the books because if Taliban found it that were not related to Islam they would burn them⁶⁰

Alima:

The Taliban had and still have the darkest beliefs. During their rule the schools were closed and women were forbidden to come out of the house alone. They were forced to be accompanied by a male relative and with a burqa. In some schools only religious education was taught. They were against science like physics and chemistry. Women were not allowed to study whatsoever. For example, I was a teacher, but I was not allowed to teach.⁶¹

Farzana:

The Taliban did not allow women to have an education or work. They were against women's rights. It greatly impacted women. They beat and

⁵⁹ Rosemarie Skaine, *The Women of Afghanistan under the Taliban* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc, 2000), 65

⁶⁰ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

⁶¹ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

killed women because they didn't want them to leave their house. I lost my job and had to move from Afghanistan because of the Taliban.⁶²

Zakia:

The Taliban took over Kandahar first, where I lived at that time. Women and girls were not going outside as much due to the Mujahidin fighting. When the Taliban took over they rode on their pickup trucks with a loud speaker and announced their creeds and the ban of education for girls and women was one of them. They said it was temporary, but it continued until the United States army came. My children stopped going to school. Only my sons would attend the mosque to learn Qur'an, but we were afraid to let them go since they taught boys radical ideas.⁶³

Anahita:

I was lucky that I left Afghanistan before the Taliban took over. However, my relative would tell me the horrible circumstances they lived under when the Taliban was controlled Afghanistan. Education for girls and women was practically banned, except that they allowed girls up to age eight to learn the Qur'an. I feel very sad for our women. They had to endure all of that in the name of religion. The Taliban were animals let out of the cage.⁶⁴

My informants' testimonies vividly describe the attitude of the Taliban towards Afghani women. All of them considered the Taliban's ban on education negatively. They believed that it was inhuman and unfair to girls and women, who woke up to the reality of being prisoners in their own homes. The Taliban took the freedom women had under the Soviet Union away. Latifa recalled,

Lot of boys in the neighborhood didn't go to the school anymore because their parents didn't want them indoctrinated by the Taliban. Compared to all these children, I've been very lucky, after all. My own education wasn't interrupted until the Taliban arrived.⁶⁵

⁶² Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

⁶³ Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

⁶⁴ Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

⁶⁵ Latifa, *My Forbidden Face*, (New York: Haperion, 2001), 120.

Most of the schools were converted into madrasas (schools where now radical ideas were taught). Girls were only allowed to attend the madrasah until age of eight, but boys did not have restriction other than limiting them to only studying the Qur'an and radical Taliban ideologies. Zoya stated, "Girls could not go to school. According to the Taliban, schools were a gateway to Hell, the first step on the road to prostitution."⁶⁶ The Taliban's view of girls and women was based on their biology rather than their status as human beings. Even the face of a woman was considered a source of corruption. Women's invisibility, especially in the public sphere, was a way for the Taliban to save the Afghani society from the moral corruption. Educated and strong willed women were barriers for the Taliban to achieve their goals in transforming Afghanistan into a caliphate of their interpretation. Women did not have a role in that caliphate. Therefore, their seclusion was necessary for the caliphate to flourish.

Women's experiences under the Taliban were very similar. They all agreed that girls and women were denied education, which was free and even compulsory in Afghanistan in the years before the Taliban. The Taliban's brutality left them helpless and imprisoned in their own homes. The Taliban took their autonomy away prohibiting them to acquire knowledge and be part of society.

Resistance till Death

Despite the conditions women and girls had to endure under the Taliban, they bravely attempted to find alternative ways to survive and to frame their goals within the

⁶⁶ Zoya, *Zoya's Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 128.

restrictive context and with limited resources. According to the historian Elaheh Rostamy-Povey, “Many women involved in education were caught by the Taliban. But even though they were persecuted, jailed and tortured, they continued the bitter struggle.”

⁶⁷ The resistance strategies of women varied, but one thing they had in common was seeking knowledge as a way for them to survive and win. Sometimes the fear of prosecution would discourage them from disobeying the Taliban’s rules. Knowledge and education became a key to resistance for Afghani women. When I asked my informants “In your opinion did the majority of women comply with Taliban’s ban on education? In what ways did Afghani women resist?” They responded as follows:

Rabya:

Some women accepted the Taliban’s ban on education and they did not do anything. The reason for the lack of resistance was fear of being killed. I taught my children secretly. I had some books that I would hide during the day and I would take them out for my children to read at night in front of the candle light. I know some women would do the same.⁶⁸

Alima:

No, the majority of women did not accept the edicts of the Taliban in regards to education. Women would teach children by pretending to just teach the Qur’an at their homes, but they would teach math, Dari language, and science. Some women would even educate other women. They would get together and pretend to be in a gathering, but in fact they would get education. Also, they would discuss news, politics and women’s duties, responsibility and rights in the society, to enlighten them about the Taliban’s fundamental views.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion* (New York: Zed Books, 2007).

⁶⁸ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

⁶⁹ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

Farzana:

When the Taliban put a ban on education, many women complied with it. Some women resisted by keeping their jobs of teaching the children secretly. They warned other women and protested against the Taliban by continuing to educate girls and boys.⁷⁰

Rabya:

Most of the women in Kandahar did comply with the Taliban's ban of education, because education was not a big factor in their life. Many would send their children to the madrasa. There were some secret women organizations that would circulate booklets about women rights and some women continued to go to each other's houses to learn basic skills like sewing. Since Kandahar was always very conservative in regards to women, the Taliban's presence did not bring a lot of changes except that women were not allowed to do anything.⁷¹

Anahita:

I don't think that all women complied with the Taliban's policies of girls and women's education, because one of my good friends was in Pakistan working for a women's organization called Revolutionary Association of Afghani Women. She would travel to Afghanistan regularly to help women establish underground schools and would provide them with supplies like books to help them teach children, especially girls. Also, they would have secret classes for women to teach them skills that they need in life.⁷²

All of these women's experiences and stories challenged the common belief that Afghani women were passive actors under the Taliban. Their experiences and stories introduce a new perspective on women's struggle against their tyrants. These women did not wait for the outside world to help them. They took the steps to keep their autonomy that the outside world considered non-existent. Underground schools were one of the biggest

⁷⁰ Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

⁷¹ Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

⁷² Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

resistance strategies against the Taliban's edicts on girls and women's education. In secret schools, many girls gained literacy skills otherwise not available to them. Latifa with the help of her friends and parents set up a secret school in her own house. She recalled,

Maryam teaches mathematics. Farida and I handle reading, history and composition. Another girlfriend specializes in English for older students. After our morning classes, I study the street out the window. If I see anyone I don't recognize or who seems suspicious, the children wait before leaving. Oddly, enough, I'm not frightened. I do my work calmly and so do my friends. Our network is airtight; we know all the parents personally, and the children are motivated and perfectly aware of the secret they must keep, the purpose of our improvised school, and its importance to them in the intellectual desert of the Taliban regime.⁷³

The underground schools were not always successful as in the case of Latifa and her friends. Most of the people who participated in secret schools run a risk of being caught and punished by the Taliban. Usually the teacher would be the one who would get the worst punishment and, of course, the children would be punished as well. The atrocities were a way to keep children out of the underground schools and in their homes without education. Despite the terrifying consequences, teachers were still motivated to continue their mission and responsibility for the youth. Latifa recalled how the Taliban caught one of her former teachers in the middle of her lesson: "First, they beat the children, then they attacked the teacher, throwing her so violently down the stairs of her building that they broke one of her legs. They threatened to stone her entire family in public if she did not confess her error."⁷⁴ Latifa's teacher was the one who, after her attack, helped to plan secret schools for Latifa and her friends. Her courage and commitment inspired hope for

⁷³ Latifa, *My Forbidden Face* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 126.

⁷⁴ Latifa, *My Forbidden Face* (New York: Hyperion, 2001), 122.

many Afghani children, and there were thousands of other women like her, who risked their lives resisting the Taliban in the same way.

The measures the Taliban took to keep girls and women from getting an education ranged from the horribly repressive to the simply ludicrous. The Taliban reduced the role of women to that of temptress who, with education, would corrupt the Islamic community. The truly amazing thing under the Taliban was that resistance occurred at all. Women resisted in every way possible, some like Rabya reading books to her children or others like Latifa running underground schools. In short, Afghani women never lost their autonomy to seek knowledge even under the most brutal regime.

CHAPTER 4

FEMALE EMPLOYMENT

Afghanistan was a liberal country with a progressive outlook on female employment. Afghani women worked in the government, educational institutions and hospitals. The female employment reforms started under King Amanullah, along with educational reforms. Under Mohammad Zahir Shah, Afghanistan was stable, but slowly progressive toward modernity from 1933 to 1973. Under Mohammad Daoud Khan, Afghanistan witnessed rapid modernization and the advancement of women's rights. Female employment was growing, but in steady pace. This chapter discusses female employment under the Soviets and the Taliban.

Along with illiteracy, female unemployment was one of the biggest challenges that Afghani women faced. Part of the problem was the result of thirty years of conflict and war. Additionally, the patriarchal and conservative nature of Afghani society had a major negative impact on female education. This suppression of skills for girls had a terrible effect on employment opportunities. During the Soviet occupation, the percentage of unemployment was low among women. However, with the fall of the communist government, the new power holders began to prohibit women from participating in any economic sector. In 1994, the Taliban kept women from working outside. Female unemployment became ingrained in Afghani society. Women's struggle for opportunities, however, did not originate and did not end with the Taliban. The Taliban era simply made things worse. It marked the highest level of discrimination against women, not only in the employment sector, but also in their role in public sphere. According to the sociologist Matthew Feilden,

A key failure of Afghanistan as a national project has been a recurrent inability to build the social fabric in a consensual manner, which takes on board the full range of perspectives from the most reactionary to the most progressive. The entire debate about modernity, development and progress in Afghanistan has always been dominated, unavoidably but perhaps unhelpfully, by the “woman question”.⁷⁵

Political groups and their programs evolved around the maintenance of gender hierarchy. Two political regimes that brought major changes to women’s role were the PDPA government with the support of the Soviet Union, and the Taliban. Each regime enforced their goals on Afghani women with consequences that my informants did not always consider favorable. Furthermore, women’s role in the employment sector altered the society in which they lived. Enlarging access to secular education and employment for all women constituted one of the strategies employed by the Soviet Union to impose their model of modernization and achieve the goal of making Afghanistan a copy of the Soviet model. While most women enjoyed working during the Soviet era, others resisted the liberal ideology of working in one space alongside men without any restriction. Women coming from a conservative background considered shared workplaces with men unsuitable. Traditional Afghans forbid interaction between men and women if they were not related to each other. Under the Taliban, most women were forced to leave their jobs. There was no more place for them in the public sphere, but nevertheless women struggled for their rights and engaged in different forms of resistance to change their community for the better.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Matthew Fielden, “Female Employment in Afghanistan: A Study of Decree # 8”, Women’s Refugee Commission (February, 2001), 13.

⁷⁶ Rosemarie Skaine, *Women of Afghanistan in the Post-Taliban Era* (Jefferson: Mcfarland & Company Inc, 2008), 75-78.

A. From Housewife to Professional

The constitution of 1964 in Afghanistan stated that women are equal to men. However, the equality was only on paper. Their status did not change, except for those who belonged to the upper strata of urban society in Kabul or other major cities. A small percentage of them started pursuing education and work, but most were still confined to their homes. Not until the late 1970s did the public sphere become an important component of their identity. After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, vast opportunities opened up for them to escape their traditional roles as homemakers and for the first time, girls were able to decide their own future by pursuing an education and working side by side with men. Along with the mass literacy campaigns, the government provided support for working women who had children. Childcare centers were built to make it easier for them to work. Maternity leaves were extended from six weeks to three months, while mothers still received their salaries. The transformation of Afghani women from homemakers to skilled workers was what the Soviet Union and the PDPA government envisioned for the Afghani society. According to Haffizullah Emadi,

To win women's support the Kabul regime initiated new legislation that supported women's rights to employment. Article 10 of the 1987 labor law stipulated equal pay for equal work and other articles entitled pregnant women to ninety days leave with all rights and privileges and the possibility of additional fifteen days of extension in case of health complication. Article 146 prohibited agencies from rejecting women's right to work on the basis of gender, and from reducing their pay because of pregnancy or childbirth.⁷⁷

The gains for women were enormous. However, families, communities and the society at large were obstacles that prevented women from advancing. Husbands would not allow

⁷⁷ Hafizullah Emadi, *Repression, Resistance, and the Women of Afghanistan*. (Westport: Praeger, 2002) 122.

their wives to work alongside with other men. Sometimes women did not work because of societal pressure; the image of professional women being negative at that time. By the end of 1980s, a large percentage of women worked in fields ranging from TV jobs to food processing. Their highest percentage was in the teaching field where they made up seventy percent of the workforce.

Embracing the Change

The PDPA's social reform policies transformed a society in which women were absent in the public sphere to one where they became active participants of change. Greater education and employment opportunities meant freedom from male authority and economic stability for Afghani women. This elevated their status from a misogynistic society where women were considered second-class citizens to a society where they were equal. Kristen Ghodsee argued, "The communists lessened women's dependence on men by making men and women equally dependent on a paternalistic state."⁷⁸ The Soviet social reforms challenged traditional beliefs, but women embraced the degree of freedom given to them by the government. When asked, "Describe the evolution of Afghani women from homemakers to professional workers? Was the change a positive impact on the Afghani society where patriarchy dominated for centuries? What were some of the negative consequences of women working alongside men?" The respondent answered as follows:

Rabya:

A lot of changes came. Most of the women worked and kindergartens were established to take care of the children for women to work outside of the house. Yes, I think women working outside the house had a positive impact. Women's role changed, and they became more involved in the

⁷⁸ Kristen Ghodsee, *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe* (New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2010), 64.

matters of their community and I think women became independent and men respected them more because they could earn money without men's help. Women no longer had to marry at a young age, they could study and work and earn money for their family.⁷⁹

Alima:

Courses were created to educate uneducated women. In those courses, besides literacy classes, there were classes about women's rights and responsibilities and duties in the family. At that time many new factories and organizations opened and a lot of women showed interest in working and being financially independent. In my opinion the changes were positive, but the male dominated society still created challenges for women. It did not have a negative impact, but in the view of conservatives, women and girls did not obey men in their families by working outside the house.⁸⁰

Farzana:

Women who could get an education and were not very conservative were able to get jobs. My family was not very conservative so I was able to go out and get a job. Women were very smart then and with the permission of their families, they could go out and get a job. Many women remained homemakers though. This change had a positive impact on the Afghani society. There weren't any negative impact on women working outside.⁸¹

Zakia:

In Kandahar, many women were not working even when the Soviets came, but I noticed in Kabul that a lot of women worked as doctors, teachers and even in the factories. I briefly worked in a clothing factory before my first baby was born and when my son was born I stayed at home, but they paid me for a while. I felt very strong when I worked, because I did not have to ask for money from my husband and I could help my family financially, even though I did not have a high level of education I was still able to find a job. I think work outside of the house was very positive for Afghani women since they could be independent, but as with education some people took advantage of the freedom and did other things

⁷⁹ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

⁸⁰ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

⁸¹ Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

that were very bad like flirting with men when they worked and wearing short skirts.⁸²

Anahita:

Employment during the Soviet Union was the biggest progress Afghani women made. Of course the change was positive and even beyond positive. Free education, literacy classes and skills classes helped women to gain employment. I was able to become a doctor with the help of the Soviets and I'm glad that I had an opportunity that women in Afghanistan did not have before the Soviets and after the Soviets left. The only negative impact was that women were not men's property; of course it was negative to men but not women.⁸³

To these women, greater employment opportunities were unquestionably positive and brought many changes in their lives beyond what they had imagined. Most women agreed that female employment helped them gain financial independence from their brothers, husbands and fathers. The cultural stereotyping of women as homemakers was not relevant to these women anymore because they gained a new identity through work. They also gained a sense of confidence and courage to fight for their rights as equal human beings. Another positive factor from female employment was the elevation of their status in the eyes of the male population. For example, Rabya stated that men respected professional women. Financial contribution from a female member of the family was a new phenomenon and women were assets contrary to the dominant cultural view that girls were a burden for a family. Besides the economic benefit of employment, women also changed the traditional pattern of their lives, which consisted of marriage at a young age, and the bearing of children as their main responsibility and duty. According

⁸² Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

⁸³ Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

to Anahita, the Afghani society considered women as men's property; therefore female employment was an opportunity for women to be individuals.

Zoya, Nelofer, and Latifa all recall their mothers working under Soviet rule, Nelofer's mother was a teacher, Latifa's mother was a doctor and Zoya's mother was a member of the RAWA movement against Russians and Islamic fundamentalists. Latifa recalled her mother working: "during the Soviet period, she had a job at our neighborhood day care center, which allowed her to have me there while she was at work. My father was quite capable of dealing with things, even hiring a cook at one time so that Mama could devote herself to her profession."⁸⁴ Men under the Soviet period gave women's professional lives a considerable attention, since women and men equally shared the responsibility. The support of men for women was also the result of a supportive government, with greater legal rights and economic development.

Violent Resistance

The transformation of a society deeply imbedded in religion and local tradition into a liberal modern society is not an easy task, and people who consider their religion and culture as the most important aspects of their lives often challenge it. Social reform such as female employment was yet another secular idea that challenged the long standing belief of women being homemakers, not bread winners. However, while the idea was comforting and favorable to some men and women, other men and women showed fierce opposition and their resistance was mostly in the form of violence against the communist government and the Soviet troops.

⁸⁴ Zoya, *Zoya's Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 54.

The communist government in support of women's rights and equality armed women against the Mujahidin threat. All members of the government received military training, and the army of unveiled Afghani women became the symbol of transformation of Afghani society. Women who supported the PDPA government and the Soviets were proud of their revolution, which meant education, employment, freedom not to wear a veil and freedom to choose their husbands. On the other hand, other women took up arms to help the Mujahidin defeat the Soviets communist government and restore Islamic values and traditions. Those who supported the Mujahidin believed in the concept of jihad. The meaning of jihad varies in Islam, but generally speaking, jihad can take two forms: struggle or fight against the enemy of Islam or struggle within oneself against sins.⁸⁵ The Soviets' secular ideology was a threat to Islamic beliefs and values, therefore, women supported the Mujahidin to fight the enemy. When asked, "Why did some women resist the idea of working outside the home? What actions did they take to fight against liberal ideas?" They responded as follows:

Rabya:

They were crazy women, they should have participated in social life and they were narrow-minded. They helped the Mujahidin and fought against the Afghani government and that resulted in a lot of people being killed.⁸⁶

Alima:

The reason some women resisted was that they were uneducated and were under male domination. They were not capable to change anything, even though they attempted to resist.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Muhammad Hisham Kabbani. [Jihad: A Misunderstood Concept from Islam](http://islamicsupremecouncil.org/understanding-islam/legal-rulings/5-jihad-a-misunderstood-concept-from-islam.html). <http://islamicsupremecouncil.org/understanding-islam/legal-rulings/5-jihad-a-misunderstood-concept-from-islam.html>.

⁸⁶ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

⁸⁷ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

Farzana:

Women who were very religious resisted the idea of working outside the home because they thought working outside was a sin. But other women fought by going to school and fought for women's right to work.⁸⁸

Zakia:

I think that for some a woman working outside the house with strange men was not acceptable and they thought it was wrong to work alongside men. But most of the women who resisted were against the Soviet Union and they helped the Mujahidin. A woman in Kandahar would cook for the Mujahidin and would inform them about the presence of Soviet troops in the area, others resisted by not working outside the house.⁸⁹

Anahita:

The women who resisted against the opportunity for women to work was due to the fact that they thought that the government wanted them to become like the communists. Some women resisted because they were under the influence of men who brainwashed them about the Soviets being the enemy of Islam and therefore they needed to join the Mujahidin in battle against the Soviets. Honestly, I thought that women who helped Mujahidin instead of getting educated and working to have a good life were just uneducated and did not know their rights and were controlled by men.⁹⁰

Anahita, Farzana, Alima, Rabya and Zakia identified women who resisted Soviet secular modernization as uneducated, narrow-minded, religious and submissive to men. The women they criticized had different perspectives regarding Soviet secular reforms. For them, the Soviets were non-believers who aimed at transforming Afghani society into a secular state. The historian Deborah Ellis writes, “One woman named Fadia was very

⁸⁸ Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

⁸⁹ Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

⁹⁰ Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

effective in luring Russian men from their platoon and assassinating them. She is said to have killed at least fifteen men before she was captured.”⁹¹ Supporting the Mujahidin and the armed resistance against the Soviets through violence was not the only way women opposed the spread of Soviet Ideology. Zoya’s mother, a member of RAWA, disseminated intelligence about Soviet brutality to recruit more women and men into joining the resistance. Zoya recalled her mother saying, “You remember those papers you carried in your backpack? Well, those were written by RAWA. They were secret papers that denounced the Russian invaders, and said that people should resist them.”⁹² RAWA members mostly engaged in non-violent forms of protest, which included circulating papers about the Soviets and their goal of demolishing Afghani culture through forced secularization. Soviets communists used women as a vehicle for robbing Afghani society of their roots. Although my informants were not personally involved in acts of violence, they all agreed that resistance existed among women. Nelofer talked about Naseema, a young woman who helped Nelofer’s family escape to Pakistan. For Naseema, smuggling people from Afghanistan to Pakistan was her revenge for the Soviet’s killing her parents before her. Some women’s resistance cannot be explained solely by their opposition to secularization. Some experienced a tragic loss in their lives that compelled them to resist no matter what new economic possibilities were offered to women under the Soviets.

⁹¹ Ellis Deborah, *Women of the Afghan War* (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 8.

⁹² Zoya, *Zoya’s Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 49.

B. Eliminating Female Employment

Upon seizing power, the Taliban not only prohibited women and girls from attending school, but they also banished women from the work place. The Taliban's gender apartheid was effective in stripping women from visibility, voice, and mobility. The Soviet era in Afghanistan marked the highest level of female employment. The number of working women started to decrease when the Mujahidin factions fought for control. It came down to being virtually nonexistent when the Taliban took over. Afghani women used to hold various positions in government administration, education, healthcare, even to engineering.⁹³ The elimination of women from the workforce had drastic consequences on the most valuable elements of Afghani society. Some widows turned to begging in the streets, while others turned to prostitution to feed their children. Some used drugs, and others even committed suicide. As the anthropologist Rostami-Povey says, war affected most of the population. "Men joined with warlords and later with Taliban, boys became involved in child labor and child soldiers. Women and girls, separated from their families by conflict, displacement and migration, turned to begging and sex work."⁹⁴ It was not a secret for anyone that the Taliban forbid work and that anyone who dared to challenge their will, would be punished. When asked, "What was the Taliban's creed on women's professional life? Did it bring difference in your life? My informants responded as follows:

⁹³ Deborah Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War* (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 167-168.

⁹⁴ Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion* (New York: Zed Books, 2007), 19.

Rabya:

When the Taliban took over Mazar-e-Sharif, they drove their trucks and through loud speakers they announced their presence and their laws. They said women are not allowed to come out of their homes, unless for a credible reason and with a male relative. The Taliban clearly announced their prohibition of women from any type of work, even the doctors and nurses were not allowed to go back to work. The Taliban would not allow male doctors to check women, but at the same time they would not allow female doctors to work, so women in Afghanistan not only suffered from not working but also from not having access to medical help. I was not working when Taliban came, but many women never went back to their jobs.⁹⁵

Alima:

The Taliban were against women's education and work outside the house. They would not accept women working like men in society under any circumstances. I was forced to stay at home, I was not allowed to go back and teach because the school closed down and all I could do was sit at home and try to entertain myself with whatever I could. The Taliban did not value education for men or for women, but especially for girls and women, education was not acceptable to them.⁹⁶

Farzana:

The Taliban didn't want women to work so they did whatever they could to stop women from working. I left Afghanistan once I lost my job, and many other women did as well. The Taliban were cruel and took away everything from women, but their beliefs were evil and certainly not Islamic.⁹⁷

Zakia:

I was not working when the Taliban came, but one of my good friends was a nurse at a local hospital in Kabul. When the Taliban came at first she was not allowed to treat any men. Men and women sections were separated, but later she was beaten by a Talib and was not allowed to go back to work, because she gave medication to a man she was not related to. The Taliban claimed that they were enforcing Islam, but their treatment

⁹⁵ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

⁹⁶ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

⁹⁷ Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

of women was showing the contrary. From my limited knowledge of Islam, I know that women have the same rights as men and can work and go to school, but the Taliban did all the bad things to women in the name of Islam, which I believe is even worse than their cruelty to the people.⁹⁸

Anahita:

The Taliban banned women from doing anything outside the walls of their homes, and that included working. Many of my female friends and relatives were forced to leave their jobs. One of my sisters was a widow and her oldest son was only six years old. When she stopped working she did not have anyone to help her out. I was helping her until she left Afghanistan and moved to Pakistan from where she migrated to America.⁹⁹

The Taliban's ban on female employment affected the majority of the women.

Even women working in the health care sector were not spared. The regime insisted that women be confined to their home. To the Taliban, women had two places "in their husband's home or the grave." The Taliban often regarded women as men's property. Women's existence depended on men, especially when it came to financial security. Those whose husbands were killed or disabled were left to beg in the streets with their small children accompanying them, but even begging was considered unacceptable and punishable by the Taliban because it was a form of work. Anahita's sister was left at the mercy of her relatives to survive, because she did not have a man to bring income and because she was not allowed to work herself. Anahita's sister was lucky, since she received aid from her relatives. However, women without extended family support were forced to beg and made their children beg as well. As a result, children suffered tremendously from malnutrition, intensive labor, and abuse from the Taliban.

⁹⁸ Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

⁹⁹ Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

My informants considered Taliban's policies un-Islamic. According to Zakia, Islam did not prohibit women from acquiring education and working. The Taliban imposed their gendered policies falsely in the name of Islam. Many Muslim scholars around the world objected to their interpretation of Islam, but Taliban found justification for their edicts no matter how bizarre they were. According to the journalist Ahmed Rashid, 'For the Taliban anyone questioning these edicts, which have no validity in the Koran, is tantamount to questioning Islam itself, even though the Prophet Mohammed's first task was to emancipate women.'¹⁰⁰ The Taliban considered their policies right and everyone else wrong. Afghani society came to resemble the pre-Islamic era, when girls were buried alive for their biology. The consequences of the Taliban's gendered policies negatively impacted women and their living conditions.

Living conditions deteriorated quickly and the last years of Taliban rule were the harshest, especially for women and children. Access to health care was available to a few, and people died from curable illnesses. Women lost their lives during childbirth, and children died at a young age due to not receiving vaccinations on time. With illiteracy rates as low as ten percent and unemployment rates higher than fifty percent, people struggled to survive. Women often turned to either begging in the streets or prostitution. Those who were forced into prostitution often ended up committing suicide and using illegal drugs.

Women in prostitution are not professionals but rather are forced into the work by economic needs. Some of Kabul's prostitutes live in brothels and must share their income with a madam and the resident pimp. The

¹⁰⁰ Ahmed Rashid. 'The Taliban: exporting extremism', (Foreign Affairs, Vol 78, No 6, 1999), 22-35.

business survives because of the frequent relocation, bribing of judicial authorities, and by entertaining the Taliban free of charge.¹⁰¹

Prostitution under the Taliban increased due to the living conditions and poverty. In the RAWA report of 1999, the women who turned to prostitution were asked why they joined sex work. The common cause of prostitution was poverty and women's inability to do any other type of work under the Taliban.¹⁰²

Hidden Resistance

The plight of Afghani women under the Taliban could not be better depicted than in the movie "Osama" by Sidiq Barmak.¹⁰³ The movie was inspired by true stories of women who were deeply affected by Taliban's rule. The story is about a family consisted solely of three women representing three generations. Golbahari, the twelve-year-old girl and her mother lose their jobs when the Taliban invade their city. In order to survive the girl is masqueraded as a boy and named Osama to support the family financially, since all the male relatives in their family were killed. When the girl's identity was discovered, she was forced to marry an old mullah, who imprisoned her along with his other wives. Afghani women did not see the light at the end of the tunnel. However, they never stopped challenging and resisting the Taliban, like Golbahari who took the identity of a boy to survive. Women's resistance to the Taliban was a matter of life and death, and they often chose to die resisting rather than living their lives as prisoners.

¹⁰¹ Rosemarie Skaine, *The Women of Afghanistan Under the Taliban*, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc, 2000), 69.

¹⁰² RAWA. *Prostitution under the Rule of Taliban*. (1999), <http://www.rawa.org/rospi.htm>.

¹⁰³ *Osama*, Sidiq Barmak. New York: United Artists, 2004.

Resistance to the Taliban gender regime emerged among women from all walks of life before the rest of the world was aware of their plight. However, scholars and activists outside the country also had a tremendous role in establishing a network of support for them. Just as they resisted the education ban, women secretly continued to work for their survival. When asked, “Do you believe that Afghani women resisted the creed that prohibited female employment? If so, how did they resist and what were the consequences of their resistance?” My informants shared the following:

Rabya:

At the beginning women were too scared to do anything, but after a while women learned how to work so the Taliban did not catch them. I was very lucky, I had my husband who worked and we had enough to feed our children, but there were women with no men in their family and they were forced to work secretly or beg. There were beggars everywhere and the saddest thing was that people did not have enough food for themselves, so they were not able to help the beggars. The consequences of working was the same as the consequence of not obeying other Taliban rules, they would beat women in the street because of begging.¹⁰⁴

Alima:

They did not resist, because they feared the Taliban’s execution. They would not resist the Taliban directly, but undercover they would work, like teach or doctors would help other women in their homes. If they were caught working, they would be punished and their male relative would have been beaten.¹⁰⁵

Farzana:

Yes, I believe that Afghani women resisted the ban of women from work outside the home because no matter what the Taliban did, women continued to work outside the home. Many of the women who resisted got what they fought for, but being beaten publically punished some.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

¹⁰⁶ Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

Zakia:

I believe that women of Afghanistan definitely resisted the Taliban, some continued to work like the doctors would see patients in the homes, the teachers would teach in their homes as well. Some women would make food at home and send their children to sell it, others would sew clothes for sell.¹⁰⁷

Anahita:

Some of my female colleagues from Afghanistan used to have their clinics in their home, treating patients both men and women. Sometimes they would not even charge people, since they knew that they did not have money to pay. Also, some women would resist by selling things they made outside, but they would run away as they noticed a Talib. For women working outside the house was very dangerous and they faced harsher punishments.¹⁰⁸

Women's opposition to work prohibitions may have been a secret to the Taliban, but other women in the community were aware about the unfolding events. Women's segregation to a private space created the possibility for them to build a network of solidarity and support. Latifa's mother was a gynecologist. Through the word of mouth women knew that Latifa's mother was a doctor and treated women and children in her house. "During the day, sometimes I opened the door to welcome Mama's clandestine patients, who continue to slip through the streets in their chadris, coming to seek her help."¹⁰⁹ Latifa recalls numerous events when women and children were brought to her mother for illnesses that could have been prevented by antibiotics, but people could not afford the medicine. Latifa's mother's duty to her community had no boundaries; although poor herself, she treated women free and most of the time bought medications

¹⁰⁷ Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

¹⁰⁸ Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ Latifa, *My Forbidden Face* (New York: Harperion, 2001), 63.

for them. A network of female solidarity existed throughout the country. Women helping women was a way for them to survive. Such resistance in the form of aid was a deceptive action aiming to transform the social system that was unfair to them.

The Taliban inflicted harsh punishments usually in the form of physical trauma to teach the public a lesson. The Taliban thought that by terrorizing women, they would be made submissive and obedient to men, but women engaged in resistance strategies as a result of Taliban's brutality. Under the Soviets Afghani women symbolized development and modernization until the Taliban prohibited them to exist as human beings in the public sphere.

C. In Conclusion

Women's participation in society as equal members is not common in underdeveloped countries, where women still do not have basic human rights. Afghanistan's history is full of events that prevented women to be part of their community. Both the Soviet backed government and the Taliban oppressed women in unique ways. Under the Soviets, women had a degree of freedom to work, but it came with sacrifices such as joining the communist party. Despite those setbacks women were relatively happy that they could work outside. The women interviewed had high regards for the possibilities they had under the Soviets. Women's resistance against secular transformations was mostly due to the clash of their belief system. However, under the Taliban, women had a different viewpoint. They considered the Taliban ideology humiliating, unfair and cruel. The inhuman treatment of women was the main cause of opposition. The Taliban claimed to be Muslims and enforce Islamic laws, but the

fundamentalist ideology of the Taliban clashed with the popular understanding of Islam in Afghanistan. As my informants' testimonies show, ordinary Afghans did not recognize their Islam in the Taliban interpretation of gender issues, which treated women as men's property.

CHAPTER 5

THE VEIL

The history of veiling and unveiling is not a new phenomenon in Afghanistan or any other Muslim majority countries. Within the history of modernity in Afghanistan, women's veiling or unveiling had symbolic meanings that were not necessarily religious. In the 1920s women were unveiling, because they were inspired by their Queen, who tore her scarf in a public function. Unveiling at that time in history was connected to modernity. Queen Soraya, who grew up in Turkey, wanted Afghani women to be modern and progressive actors in their society. Unveiling began decades before the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. However, this chapter discusses the Soviets' and the Taliban's policies regarding to women's veiling and modesty.

Most Muslim women today do not wear a full-face veil. It is common to see them in hijab, a scarf worn around the head and under the chin with loose fitted clothing. Muslim women do not share a common style nor do they have the same reasons for veiling. Hijab in Arabic means "to veil", "to cover" or "partition." A hijab is a form of veiling that Muslim women wear for many reasons. It reflects their belief in obeying God's commandments, whereas for others it is simply a type of traditional clothing they feel comfortable in. Women practice different styles of hijab depending on the region and local traditions. In the same way that a hijab is worn in different forms, the reasons for wearing a hijab vary among Muslim women in different parts of the world. The first and most common reason for wearing a hijab is piety, but in the past few decades, a hijab is not only a means to observe God's commandments, but also a means to construct one's identity. A hijab makes a very strong and powerful political statement about women's

agency and resistance. This chapter will discuss the role of modesty, the veil in Afghan society, and the impact of the Soviets' and the Taliban's ideology on women's observance of modest dress code.

Along with the headscarf, that Muslim women wear there is a modest form of dress as well. Veiled women or *muhajiba* wear loose fitting clothing that covers their whole body except their hands and feet. People with different levels of religious knowledge and piety determine what constitutes a hijab for them. In the West, particularly in the United States, women have a choice to decide whether to veil or not to veil. However, in some Islamic countries the veil is not an option. Rather, it is the law. Its style varies locally. For example, Muslim women wear the *niqab* in Saudi Arabia, the *chador* in Iran and the burqa in Afghanistan. The *niqab* is a veil that entirely covers a person, including the mouth and the nose, and has a small opening for the eyes. The *chador* is a full garment that covers the body and the hair; it is open at the front. The burqa covers the head and the body and has a grill, which hides the eyes. It is important to note that the term burqa is not used in Afghanistan. The burqa is a translation of a word *chadori*, which is commonly used by Afghani people.

A. Veiling in the Islamic Context

The major information about veiling is derived from Islamic religious texts (Qur'an and Hadith). Interpretations of the Qur'an and the hadiths are open-ended. Whether the veil is required in Islam depends primarily on the interpretation of religious texts by Islamic scholars. It is also important to note that geography is another factor that affects whether the veil is required or not. The discourse of the veil is not a new

phenomenon; moreover, it existed for centuries and continues to be a very controversial topic among imams, academic scholars and ordinary people.

The veil can be considered as one of the most controversial topics in the Qur'an and in Islam at large. There are several verses in the Qur'an in reference to the veil and modesty. Imams and lay people refer to the following verse from the Qur'an: 24:30-31, 32: 32-33, 33:58-59. The term hijab is used in the Qur'an a total of five times (7:46; 19:16-17; 33:53; 41:5; 42:51). Every instance of the term is used as "barrier" or "partition." For example, Qur'an 7: 47 translates as "between them shall be a veil, and on the heights will be men who would know everyone by his marks: they will call out to the Companions of the Garden, 'peace on you': they will not have entered, but they will have an assurance (thereof)." ¹¹⁰ Other translations of the term 'hijab' are "behind a veil," "secluded," and "behind a screen." A hijab does not refer to women's headscarf in the Qur'an. However, other verses from the Qur'an directly refer to a woman's modesty, including the veil.

The verses 30 and 31 from chapter 24 are widely used as references to veiling both by imams and lay people. The verses read:

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their

¹¹⁰ Yusuf Ali, ' Qur'an (7:45).

feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss. ¹¹¹

Verse 30 and the beginning of verse 31 command not only Muslim men and women, but also believing (Jewish and Christian) men and women to restrain their gaze and avoid casting of looks freely. Chastity and modesty are core values in the Qur'an. Therefore, the verses suggest that one should turn the eyes away to avoid having a look at something that is not desirable to see. The context of the gaze is limited to men gazing at women in indecent ways and vice versa. Women are advised "that they should draw their veils over their bosoms." Khimar is used in the verse and interpreted as veil or headscarf.¹¹² Women are commanded to lower their veil or headscarf over their chest, and women are not allowed to show their beauty to anyone that is not listed in the verses. What constitutes as beauty varies among cultures. In some cultures hair is considered a part of women's beauty, while others view hair as other parts of the body. For them hair does not have a significant role in identifying one's beauty. Verses 33:58-59 from the Qur'an read:

And those who annoy believing men and women undeservedly bear (on themselves) a calumny and a glaring sin. O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. ¹¹³

These particular verses can be interpreted as commands for women to dress modestly to avoid harassment from non-Muslims. Verse 58 addresses both men and women, but verse 59 commands believing women (Jews, Christians, and Muslims) to wear an outer

¹¹¹ Yusuf Ali, Qur'an 24: 30-31.

¹¹² Nimat Hafez Barazangi, *Women's Identity and the Qur'an* (Tampa, University Press of Florida, 2006), 65.

¹¹³ Yusuf Ali Qur'an 33: 58-59.

garment when they are outside the house. The purpose of verse 59 was not to cover or confine women to their houses but protect them from harassment in the public space. The above verses do not directly refer to the veil, but are often used to argue that not only the Prophet's wives and daughters but also all other believing women are obligated to veil. The verses deal with modesty rather than the veil. However, modesty directly relates to the veil, because the veil represents modesty for many Muslims around the world.

Veiling in Afghanistan

Unveiling did not start under the Soviet occupation. It was already in progress when the Soviets came to Afghanistan in 1979. In *The New Women in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity and Unveiling under Communism*, Marianne Kamp argues that unveiling among Uzbek women started before the Russian Revolution of 1917. Unveiling was an individual act carried by the Uzbeks themselves and not imposed by Russian outsiders. Kamp further argues that the Soviet efforts to liberate women were based on ideas that already existed in Uzbekistan.¹¹⁴ Similar to Uzbek women, Afghani women were unveiling individually before 1979. However, the Soviet invasion accelerated this process and made reform collective rather than individual. Queen Soraya, the reformist Mahmud Tarzi's daughter, tore her veil in a public function in the 1920s. That was the beginning of the unveiling movement that slowly progressed over the years leading to the Soviet invasion. In 1959, at the fortieth celebration of national independence, under Mohammad Daoud Khan, wives of ministers appeared unveiled. First in the 1920s unveiling constituted an individual act, but later the Soviets encouraged all women to unveil.

¹¹⁴ Marianne Kant, *The New Women in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity and Unveiling Under Communism*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

B. The Veil as a Symbol of Backwardness

For Afghan modernist and communists, the veil was a symbol of rejection of modernity. It was a mere symbol of backwardness. Similar to the Soviets, Great Britain considered the veil as a backward and archaic practice. Such discourse was the product of colonial domination in the nineteenth century. According to the historian and activist Leila Ahmed, westerners often criticized Muslims for their backward practices using the veil as an example. In *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (1992) she argues that,

Veiling to Western eyes—the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies—became the symbol (in colonial discourse) of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam.¹¹⁵

For the Soviets and the PDPA, liberating women included unveiling as the best way for Muslims to accept modernity and abandon ancient practices that they deemed oppressive. Since Afghani society was taking the path of modernity well before the Soviet invasion, the transformation was easy and convenient. Some Afghani women had already been open to these so-called progressive ideas and adjusted well to the new social norms. As for British and Soviets, the veil for the PDPA members was a symbol of limitation. It kept women from freeing themselves from repressive traditions and from advancing economically. In general, under the communist government women rejected, or accepted the new dress code depending on location, education or family background. While women from Kabul wholeheartedly welcomed unveiling, those from Kandahar a more rural, ethnically less diverse area, opposed it.

¹¹⁵ Leila Ahmed, 1992, *Women and Gender in Islam. Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 43.

Abandoning the Veil

Abandoning the veil did not simply mean leaving Islam behind and accepting communism. Unveiling for some Afghani women was a statement of aspiration for modernity, education, work, and equality. The phenomenon of unveiling started well before the PDPA party was established. Although in fewer numbers, some women in urban cities were already unveiling and adapting to western dress norms. For instance, Rabya stated that her sisters did not wear a veil in the 1970s before the Soviet invasion.¹¹⁶ The Soviets' presence made unveiling more acceptable, since the number of unveiled women increased substantially. When asked, "Describe how the years leading to Soviet Invasion and under the Soviet invasion reflected on women's modesty and the veil? In your opinion why did women abandon the veil?" My interviewees' responded as follows:

Rabya:

I remember when I was a little girl my mother wore a scarf. However, my sister-in-law did not wear a scarf. If I recall correctly, this was in the middle of the 1970s, before the Soviets came. There were women who wore the big scarf, which wrapped around the upper body, but there were also women who did not. When the Soviets came, more women started dressing less modestly and the headscarf was not very common among young women, but most of the older women continued to wear it. In my opinion, some women unveiled because they wanted to fit in the new society. Unveiled women usually got good positions in the government and some even were sent to other countries like Tashkent and Russia to study. Unveiled women were considered more open minded and the government did not suspect them of being engaged with the Mujahidin.¹¹⁷

Alima:

In the years leading to the Soviets, some women wore the burqa, while others wore a small scarf and the most open-minded women did not wear

¹¹⁶ Haffizullah Emadi, *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 104.

¹¹⁷ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

anything. In the rural areas women mostly wore the burqa, because they were very conservative. The Soviets did not have a big role in women's veiling and modesty, but women who wanted to unveil and dress immodestly had an opportunity to do so because the government allowed it. However, I don't think in any way that Soviets are to blame for Afghani women's unveiling. The open-minded women used the opportunity to dress as they wished, but they did not do so to abandon Islam, it was just to adjust into the new culture and modernization. ¹¹⁸

Farzana:

I don't remember much prior to Soviet invasion, because I was very young. But I remember not wearing a scarf and neither did my sisters who were older than me. Some women just did not wear a scarf, but when the Soviets came many women started wearing very immodest clothing, short skirts with high heels, and in Kabul most women dressed that way, except the ones who were very conservative. I think that the Soviets did influence women's clothing, because women who dressed conservatively usually were not given a lot of opportunities to work. ¹¹⁹

Zakia:

I did not see a lot of change prior to the Soviets, because I lived in the rural areas and people did not really change their way of life. But when I came to Kabul, I saw many women dressing very inappropriately and against our cultural values. Many wore very short dresses or skirts and liberal forms of dress were very popular and encouraged, because even in schools girls had uniforms that included knee length skirts. I believe that the Soviets' goal was to make Afghani woman dress like their own women. Women abandoned the veil and modest clothing because they wanted to be like others in their society and to get there, they used their appearance. Some women were very religious, but they did not veil, so I think abandoning the veil was not because they did not believe in Islam, but they just wanted to fit in and be successful like women in Russia and other countries. I wore the veil, but when I moved to Kabul I just wore a small scarf rather than the big scarf I used to wear in Kandahar. ¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

¹¹⁹ Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

¹²⁰ Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

Anahita:

My family was very liberal. Growing up I never wore the scarf. The scarf lost popularity I would say in the late 1960s and 1970s. When the Soviets came it was kind of officially looked down at. Many women both educated and uneducated stopped wearing the scarf, but they still followed their religion and did other practices. Some women even adopted very liberal forms of clothing like the Russian mini-skirt. It was very popular among young women. Women wanted to follow the trend and wanted to look like western women, therefore the veil was not appealing.¹²¹

According to these women, unveiling and western dress norms were not related to women's piety; rather, it symbolized progress and success. Unveiled women had better opportunities compared to veiled and conservative women, but 'religious' women were as likely to unveil as the less 'religious' women. It is important to point out that the unveiling phenomenon was mostly practiced by the youth, while the older women kept their veil, or at least some form of modest head covering. Since all these women were very young during the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, they did not wear a veil except for Zakia, which indicates that the majority of women both in Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif had unveiled and accepted new concepts of modesty. For them, the veil was a symbol of contrast between westernized liberated women and Muslim women still oppressed by ancient customs. Therefore, to overcome social limitations, many opted for a more functional form of dress but without giving up their Islamic identity.

Nelofer was a devoted Muslim and throughout her memoirs she recalls praying and attending religious ceremonies. However, Nelofer as many other girls of her age did not veil. "I'm wearing a red dress that falls just below my knees and my head is not

¹²¹ Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

covered.”¹²² For Nelofer, her outer appearance was not an indication of her religious devotion. Her piety as a Muslim could not be measured by her dress. Most important for her generation the burqa was a piece of garment that concealed women’s identity and individuality. According to Zoya, who also unveiled, only a select group of women wore the burqa: illiterate women from the countryside, beggars and prostitutes who did not want to be recognized?¹²³ Perhaps the stigma of the burqa as a symbol of illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and prostitution explained those women’s desire to remain unveiled and adopt what was socially most acceptable at the time. Nelofer, Zoya and Latifa’s narratives portrayed them and their family members as modern liberated women. However, unveiling was not an indicator of their abandoning their religion. Rather, unveiling for women meant resistance against misogyny and restrictive societal roles.

Leila Ahmad’s description of Egyptian women in the 1960s and 1970s applies to Afghani women: “while the few women who continued to cover were regarded as backward, women who did not cover and who wore Western-style dress (without veil) were not seen as any ‘less Muslim’ than others.”¹²⁴ Modernity in terms of unveiling was not necessarily detrimental to women’s piety. The core principles of modernity were advancement and progress, not secularization and disbelief in higher entities. As in Egypt unveiling in Afghanistan did not go against women’s religious identity.

¹²² Nelofer Pazira, *A Bed of Red Flowers* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 162.

¹²³ Zoya, *Zoya’s Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 23.

¹²⁴ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam. Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 86.

Veiled Resistance

As noted by Leila Ahmad in *Quiet Revolution*, the reappearance of the veil in the 1970s in many Muslim majority countries was another sign of resistance for a new generation of educated middle-upper class women.¹²⁵ The veil for Egyptian women was not a mere symbol of piety, but it was a political statement against authoritarian secular regimes. Another important scholar, Elizabeth Fernea also notes that, “wearing of Islamic dress also relates to the individual’s sense of belonging to a group, and to the individual’s sense of her own identity.”¹²⁶ Likewise for Afghani women, the wearing of the veil gave them a sense that they constituted a separate community with their own morals, values and ideals. While many accepted the liberalization more and welcomed new job opportunities, others challenged the western orientalist image of veiled women as being oppressed. For those women who supported and assisted the Mujahidin, the veil was the symbol of their piety and resistance. They were fighting against atheism. When asked, “In your opinion, were modesty and the veil a form of resistance to the Soviets?” My interviewees shared the following:

Rabya:

Yes, because many women who wore the veil in the city of Kabul were usually involved in the organizations that were against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. However, the women who supported the Mujahidin were the ones who actually wore the burqa, because the Mujahidin believed that women should dress that way. But, some women who wanted to wear it did not wear it, because government officers would target them.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam. Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992).

¹²⁶ Elizabeth Fernea. “The Veiled Revolution” in *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 156.

¹²⁷ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

Alima:

By using the veil the women were involved in resistance, because the veil concealed their identity and they used the veil to communicate with the Mujahidin and help them in the fight against the Russians.¹²⁸

Farzana:

At that time the chador was associated with women who helped the Mujahidin. By the end of 1980s there were more women who wore some type of scarf. I think they started wearing the scarf to protest against the government and its support for the Soviet Union.¹²⁹

Zakia:

Yes and no, because even before the Soviets came many women still wore the scarf, but they wore it because they wanted to follow their religion. I think the women who started wearing the scarf during the Soviet invasion were showing their resistance against the secular ideology of the Russians, but the older population did not have such intention, they were just doing what their religion required them to do.¹³⁰

Anahita:

Under the Soviets, women had so many freedoms, but some women did not like that they were free from being oppressed by men and started helping the Mujahidin groups to fight against the government and the Russian army. They used the veil to conceal their identity. These women did not know that the Mujahidin were worse than animals, and they would destroy Afghanistan and the progress made under the Soviets.¹³¹

It is important to differentiate between women who wore the veil as part of their identity, and those who wore it for political and religious resistance. The older generation of women in Afghanistan veiled, but their form of veil was traditional and the rationale was that the veil was part of their cultural values. Women who wore the veil were

¹²⁸ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

¹²⁹ Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

¹³⁰ Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

¹³¹ Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

respected and regarded as “good” women. Women in Afghanistan separated into three groups: the first group of women supported the PDPA government and embraced the social change, including unveiling and adaptation of revealing clothing. The second group of women was caught in the middle and lived without interfering in politics. The third group of women opposed secular social reforms and resisted by initiating movements, whether it was joining RAWA, helping the Mujahidin or veiling to symbolize resistance.

Zoya stated, “In the streets of Kabul, I had often seen women hiding underneath these burqas. They looked so strange next to the beautiful young women of the city who walked happily arm in arm, wearing makeup and short skirts.”¹³² Zoya’s mother was a member of RAWA, and Zoya recalls opening the door to a woman wearing a burqa. She was frightened and hesitated to allow the woman inside, but she learned that it was her mother wearing the burqa, although it was her mother who told her that illiterate women, beggars and prostitutes wear the burqa. Zoya learned later that her mother was “wearing it to save her life.”¹³³ Zoya’s mother was wearing the burqa to conceal her identity from the government intelligent officers (khad), as did hundreds of other women who were secretly involved in the underground organization like RAWA.

For some women the burqa or a simple headscarf was a way to resist the government in a peaceful manner. Zakia wore a veil because she believed that her religion and cultural morals were more important than the modernity exemplified by government under foreign influence, therefore, it was her way to show her resistance

¹³² Zoya, *Zoya’s Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 23.

¹³³ Zoya, *Zoya’s Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 25.

without engaging in violence. For Rabya, Farzana and Alima, unveiling did not carry a negative connotation, therefore they adapted to the situation. For Anahita unveiling meant progress, and therefore veiling, as a form of resistance against the Soviets made no sense. She believed that the Soviets provided opportunities for women to be free from the oppressive ideology of Afghan patriarchy. In general, women's position regarding veiling/unveiling depended on their family background, geographical location, education or age.

C. Veiling under the Taliban

The Taliban war on women did not only include the banning of education, employment, and freedom of movement, but also freedom of expression. Chadori (burqa) was a form of veil the Taliban enforced on Afghani women. Essentially, its purpose was to conceal a woman's body and identity. The burqa came in many colors, but blue burqas were more associated with the Taliban than any other color, because the blue burqa was cheaper than other colors. Along with the burqa, women also had to observe a strict dress, which included prohibition of sandals, high heels, bright colors, nail polish, makeup, perfume and everything else that made women appear seductive.

Burqa or Death

The Taliban adopted different strategies to reinforce their policies. They terrorized women into obeying the dress code, by publicly conveying out the punishments. According to Hafizullah Emadi, "to implement its strict version of Sharia Laws the Taliban unleashed an army of enforcers throughout territories under its

domination.”¹³⁴ The brutality of the Taliban enabled them to hold power over people’s life. Anyone who resisted paid a heavy price. Because Taliban lived in people’s homes, it was difficult to evade punishment. When asked, “What do you think about the dress code women had to observe under the Taliban?” My interviewees’ responded as follows:

Rabya:

The Taliban dress code was the most humiliating and degrading thing to Afghani women; women were banned from being women. I had a difficult time wearing the chadori (burqa), it was very heavy and I could not see anything. Wearing the chadori made me feel very sad for Afghani women, because our rights were taken away and we could not do anything. If anyone attempted to do something, they were beaten or killed.¹³⁵

Alima:

The burqa was a humiliation to all Afghani women, especially those who were highly educated and wise. The Taliban perceived women to be like animals without judgment. They forced women, who could otherwise decide for them, to wear the burqa and hide their identity and face. Why? Because they were animals praying for flesh, therefore they thought that if they covered the women’s body they would not be tempted to want it.¹³⁶

Fazana:

All women were required to wear the Burqa even girls as young as seven or eight years old. Everything needed to be covered; it was very hard to dress the way the Taliban wanted especially when it was hot outside. Women sometimes would not go out of the house for weeks and months because they did not want to wear the burqa. I don’t believe that Islam requires women to dress the way the Taliban did, because God would not want us to suffer, He is great and merciful.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Hafizullah Emadi, *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan* (Westport: Praeger Publishers 2002), 126.

¹³⁵ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

¹³⁶ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

¹³⁷ Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

Zakia:

The Taliban were very bad people because they made all Afghani people suffer. However, I think women suffered the most since they were not allowed to do or say anything. The Taliban required chadori, and women would be punished if they did not wear it. Even wearing a big scarf like we used to do in Kandahar was not allowed by the Taliban.¹³⁸

Anahita:

I'm very glad that I did not have to wear the chadori because I know for sure that I would not have tolerated such humiliation. According to the Taliban, the dress code was Islamic, but the dress code is not specified in the Qura'n for women as wearing a chadori. The only thing I can say is that women's choice was taken away from them, and it was humiliating to force women to wear the chadori.¹³⁹

The burqa, or chadori as the women referred to, was "humiliating". Rabya, Alima, and Anahita considered the burqa oppressive to them who were educated and wise enough to differentiate between good and bad. Zakia grew up in the more conservative rural area of Kandahar, where women wore a burqa or a big scarf wrapping their whole body, but even she did not approve of the Taliban's enforcement of the restrictive dress code. Farzana considered the Taliban's dress code as un-Islamic. Her definition of Islamic dress code was different from the Taliban who asserted that their interpretation was derived from the Qur'an and hadiths.

The burqa did not have a good reputation among city dwellers. It was considered offensive because few women wore it in the past decades before the Taliban took over. Latifa and her family saw their lives change in the blink of an eye. For them, the Taliban's edicts deprived them from their individual liberty and were based on sexual

¹³⁸ Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

¹³⁹ Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

racism.¹⁴⁰ Latifa recalls an event when she and her sister packed their clothes and hid them from the Taliban.

I packed my prettiest dresses into a suitcase, keeping only pants and black running shoes. Soraya does the same thing. Her pretty Aryana Airlines uniform, her short, colorful skirts, her spring blouse, her high heels and rainbow-hued sweaters, now “indecent.”¹⁴¹

The enforcement of the burqa in Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif was devastating. These two cities had made the fastest progress in elevating women’s professional status in the years leading to Soviet withdrawal. Even uneducated women who had experienced life in rural areas considered the burqa “humiliating.” For all my informants, the Taliban’s restrictive dress code took away their autonomy and ability to express themselves as they wished.

Resistance till Death

In general, educated women did not accept the Taliban’s constraining dress code and the burqa. The burqa as a form of veil pre-existed the Taliban in the city and countryside. The Taliban enforced the blue burqa whereas women in rural areas wore burqas of different colors as part of their everyday clothing. For Lila Abu-Lughod, who wrote *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, women were not oppressed by religion, but rather by men who were barbaric and quenched for power.¹⁴² Puzzled that some women in the rural areas did not take off their burqa after the Taliban regime, Abu-Lughod realized that the burqa was a type of hijab that existed among Pashtun tribal communities well before

¹⁴⁰ Latifa, *My Forbidden Face*, (New York: Haperion, 2001), 38.

¹⁴¹ Latifa, *My Forbidden Face* (New York: Haperion, 2001), 39.

¹⁴² Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving* (Cambridge: Harward University Press, 2013).

the Taliban came to power. It symbolized modesty and reflected the respectable reputation of a woman. In the countryside, the majority of women were housewives, and rarely left their homes. The burqa provided a way for them to be in their own private space while leaving their homes. However, for my informants who had experienced different ways of dressing in the public space, the burqa was oppressive.

It had a cultural rather than religious connotation. Zakia clearly described her hometown of Kandahar as being very conservative. Local traditions considered a woman respectable only if she was covered head to toe, but in Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif, women's veiling was not considered as a proof of respectability. For this reason, when the Taliban enforced the veil, many women considered it humiliating. Their perception of Islam was also different from the Taliban. For them the Taliban dress code was not based on the Qur'an. Their own interpretation was that the veil was a choice, not an obligation.

As described above, modesty is a controversial topic in Islamic discourse, since the Qur'an does not command women to dress a certain way. The Qur'an being open to interpretation, people with varying degrees of knowledge may interpret verses differently. Geographical location also determines the way people perceived the veil. Those who lived in rural areas tended to see the veil as a requirement, but for those who lived in cities, the veil was a choice, not a religious obligation. Additionally, religious and secular education had an impact on women's perception of the Taliban dress codes. When asked, "Do you believe that Muslim women are required to observe the Taliban's restrictive dress code according to Islamic text such as Qur'an? Why and how did Afghani women resist the restrictions concerning veiling, clothing and beauty?" My interviewees' responded as follows:

Rabya:

My father was very religious, but he never forced us to wear a scarf. He believed that religion is something that is voluntary, so I grew up with the same belief. I know how to read the Qur'an. However, I do not know how to interpret it, but many of the interpretation that I read did not mention burqa as a form of veiling. The mullahs always preached that women should cover their body and their hair, but to my family and me the clothing did not matter a lot. A lot of women were literate when the Taliban came, so I think they considered the burqa humiliating because they believed that the burqa was forced by the Taliban's wrong interpretation of the Qur'an, so they resisted because the men who did not even know how to read and write forced it on them. ¹⁴³

Alima:

Of course, the Taliban's dress code is not required according to the Qur'an. I'm well versed in the Qur'an and I can for sure say that God does not require women's identity to be concealed by a piece of fabric like the burqa. Many women like me were educated and knew their religion well. I heard of some women taking off their burqa in front of the Taliban. Some women would still do their hair and makeup under the burqa. Some women would wear formal dresses when they went to parties; the burqa was a good way to cover their occasion dress, even though they were forbidden to do so. Since the Taliban were not allowed to look at women's faces, women would wear makeup under the burqa without being caught. ¹⁴⁴

Farzana:

I don't think Muslim women have to wear the Taliban dress code, because I know that Islam gives women the choice to decide whether they want to wear a scarf or no. The Taliban used Islam to make sure women obeyed their rules because it was based on Islamic beliefs, but I know it was not. I lived both in Mazar and Kabul under the Taliban. In Kabul many women would wear makeup and nail polish, but they would hide it by wearing socks, gloves and the burqa to cover it. ¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Rabya, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 25, 2016.

¹⁴⁴ Alima, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 10, 2016.

¹⁴⁵ Farzana, interview by Shabnam Rezai, July 28, 2016.

Zakia:

I think women should wear a veil, but not the burqa, because it is not mentioned in the Qu'ran. It may be mentioned in the Hadith, but the Qur'an is more important than the hadith. I always wore a veil, even under the Russians. I wanted to wear it, nobody forced me but under the Taliban, women were forced. I heard of an incident when one woman took off her burqa when the Taliban were harassing her on the street, she was beaten very badly. Others would be punished for wearing nail polish on their hands or feet.¹⁴⁶

Anahita:

The burqa is something that village people created and that the Taliban forced all women to wear. As a Muslim woman, I can say that Islam does not require women to be without identity and without voice. Yes, it is true that I'm very liberal, but both my parents are practicing Muslims and taught me about my beliefs when I was young. The Taliban's ideology is very different from the way Islam was practiced by people in Afghanistan, and I think the difference between the Islam of Afghani people and the Islam of the Taliban made people hate them and resist them. I know women never gave up on their right, and they did what they wanted but under the burqa.¹⁴⁷

The majority of the Taliban were from rural areas. They enforced the burqa and claimed it to be a divine requirement. For my urban interviewees though, the burqa concealed women's identity, voice, and existence as unique individuals. For them, the Taliban dress code was not a requirement in Islam. The burqa as a form of veiling was not mentioned in the Qur'an and was invented by people in the rural parts of Afghanistan. Each of my informants developed their own jurisprudence. For example, Farzana and Rabya believed that veiling was a choice (God would not make women suffer) whereas Zakia argued that the veil but not the burqa was a religious obligation. Even if the burqa happened to be

¹⁴⁶ Zakia, interview by Shabnam Rezai, August 15, 2016.

¹⁴⁷ Anahita, interview by Shabnam Rezai, September 20, 2016.

mentioned in the hadith, the Qur'an should take precedence. Although each woman's perception of Islam varied depending on their degree of knowledge, one thing they had in common was that they all agreed that the burqa was not a form of veiling required or mentioned in the Qur'an.

Afghani women found multitude ways to resist the burqa, even if they wore it. They did not give up their individuality. According to Alima, Farzana, and Zakia, they continued wearing colorful clothing, makeup and even nail polish underneath the burqa. Their garment became a tool of resistance against Taliban rule. They used it to do exactly what the Taliban forbade them to do. Although considered oppressive, the burqa served them as a protective shield. Makeup, nail polish, colorful dresses underneath the burqa were all forms of resistance that women engaged in to maintain their identity. This form of resistance was also a product of their understanding of scripture: Zakia placed the Qur'an before the hadith and Anahita claimed that people hated the Taliban, not only because they were barbaric, but because their radical ideology clashed with a more common sense reading of scripture.

D. In Conclusion

The memoirs and interviews of Afghani women reflect on the long battle over women's body in Afghani society. The two regimes that invaded Afghanistan had drastically different ideologies in regards to women's sexuality and modesty. The regimes were persistent in conveying their message either peacefully or forcefully. It was a challenging transition for women to go from being unveiled to wearing a burqa. The dress codes enforced by both regimes were to different degrees oppressive to Afghani

women. Nevertheless, women had distinct views of the Soviet and Taliban dress requirements. The Soviets did not require women to unveil, but it was highly encouraged and unveiled women were considered progressive and modern. Women were given better opportunities, whereas the Taliban forced women to wear the burqa along with restrictive dress. Some Afghani women considered the Soviet cultural transformation oppressive, but in comparison with the Taliban, the women preferred the Soviet secular ideology stand on women's autonomy in the public space then the Taliban's restrictive policies. Afghani women asserted their identity under both regimes, by using the veil as a means to express their opposition. Under the Soviets, some women chose to wear the veil to express their religiosity or resistance to the Sovietization of their indigenous culture. Others under the Taliban expressed their resistance by concealing what was forbidden under the burqa.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The American-led 'war on terror' affected how media outlets addressed and stereotyped Islam. Afghanistan became a prime example of this process. One of the most common stereotypes involved women. In addition to the media, some scholarly works portrayed them as passive victims of male dominated society. The Bush administration justified the 'war on terror' as a rescue mission for Afghani women, who were victims of the Taliban. Four decades of continuous war created a dire situation of underdevelopment. The years of war resulted not only in the loss of life, but also in the loss of autonomy. In 1979, the communist party of Afghanistan attempted to modernize society through dictatorial means and succeeded only in creating social conflict that Soviets created. Soviet social and cultural reforms started right after the invasion. They affected all people, but especially women. Their role and social status changed substantially in the areas of education, employment, and dress. Under the Soviets, my informants opted for three different approaches: Anahita and Alima embraced the changes, Rabya and Farzana were neutral, Zakia, Nelofer, and Zoya resisted the reforms. A few years after the Soviets left Afghanistan; the Taliban took over most parts of the county and enforced their worldview, which was the opposite of the Soviets' secular ideology. The Taliban, unlike the Soviets, banned education, prohibited women from working, and enforced a restrictive dress code. In this new situation all my informants opposed these extreme policies and engaged in some type of resistance to maintain their autonomy.

A. The Soviets vs the Taliban

The study explored the ways Soviet and Taliban ideologies affected women in education, employment, and dress, and how women experienced and expressed agency in all three areas. Education is one of the foundations for a society to flourish and develop. Employment is as important because through employment people can bring change to their life and society. Clothing is also an important identity marker. Usually it illustrates the values and beliefs of a particular community and time, but it can also change meaning depending on the politics or the individual.

The Soviets' educational reforms aimed at increasing school enrollment for both boys and girls. It also aimed at building new schools in rural and urban areas. All my informants agree that Soviet educational reforms were positive. Primary and secondary education was free and accessible for everyone. However, Soviets educational reforms had a hidden agenda. Their goal was to de-Islamize Afghani society. In their modernization project, the Soviets and communist Afghans targeted women. They spread their model of socialization, which was hostile to religion, by controlling the curriculum of schools and higher educational institutions. They removed the subject of religion and emphasized math and science. Children learned Russian and studied Soviet history, but not Afghan history. The most interesting aspect of Soviet reform was the organization of literacy courses for women specifically.

According to the PDPA and the Soviets, the goal was to liberate women, who were victims of a repressive backward culture. Through education they could finally be free. While the Soviets tried to secularize women through a "modernized" curriculum, the Taliban banned education for women and girls. Taliban edicts prohibited women from

attending school and any form of literacy classes, except for girls until the age of eight who could attend religious schools. There they could memorize the Qur'an. The Taliban aimed to preserve men's authority over women. Banning education was the first step to detach women from their being involved in the economic development of society.

Besides educational reforms, the Soviets facilitated employment for women. The reforms encouraged women to abandon their traditional roles of homemakers and to become professional workers. However, employment opportunities given to women came with conditions that women had to accept. They had to join the communist party in order to gain a reputable position in the government and they had to conform to secular ideology and abandon their Islamic ideals. In contrast, the Taliban prohibited women from working in all sectors. The ban was their way to reaffirm male authority. As a result of female unemployment, Afghani society deteriorated.

In addition to education and employment reforms, both regimes enforced their rules on women's clothing. The Soviets did not force women to abandon their modesty and veil. However, the communist government discouraged wearing the veil. The Soviets and their Afghan allies considered veil as a symbol of backwardness, which confined and limited women's ability to progress and become modern. While the Soviets encouraged women to unveil and embrace more liberal forms of clothing, the Taliban enforced restrictive clothing including the chadori or burqa. The Taliban forced Afghani women to dress in a way that concealed their identity as unique individuals.

B. The Discourse

The study challenges the assumption that Afghani women had not agency, that they were oppressed awaiting liberation. My informants' testimony shows that Afghani women resisted both the Soviets and the Taliban. There were no less powerful than men as agents of change. Indeed, Afghani women were victims of oppression, but this study found that the Afghani women did not wait for others to liberate them. Women participated in both violent and non-violent forms of resistance to assert their identity and autonomy.

Under the Soviet Rule

Women responded differently to Soviet's educational reforms. Two trends can be observed: one enthusiastic, the other lukewarm. One group, Alima and Anahita, was fully supportive of the new educational system. They believed that education was key for Afghani women to become independent and powerful in their communities. They did not agree that the Soviets meant to lessen their piety. Since Anahita and Alima favored the Soviet educational system, they did not engage in any form of resistance. Both Alima and Anahita were highly educated. Alima was a chemical engineer and Anahita a doctor. They both lived in urban cities, Kabul or Mazar-e-Sharif. As discussed previously the geographical location had an effect on women's perspectives. They both profited from Soviet opportunities to advance their education. Farzana and Rabya also supported secular education in public schools, but they were less enthusiastic. In their opinion, education was beneficial for Afghani girls and women. However, they believed that education also

contributed to the breakdown of morality in their communities. Since boys and girls were no longer segregated in schools, they were tempted to engage in wrong relationships. Both Rabya and Farzana grew up in Kabul and they described their families as practicing Muslims who valued education. Therefore, they favored the PDPA's educational reforms, which gave women greater freedom.

Just as in education, women's wider access to employment played a vital role in the transformation of their economic status. Most of my interviewees and memoirs writers supported female employment campaign. Alima, Anahita, Farzana, and Rabya participated in the workforce. They believed that work in the public sphere elevated their social status. They gained economic stability and independence from father, brothers, and husbands. Male members of their families even realized that their wives and daughters could be a financial asset. All four women considered women who did not participate in the workforce, illiberal, conservative, and blamed these women's families for not allowing them to work. According to Nelofer, those who held the highest positions entered the communist party, some even engaged in sexual activities to climb up the social hierarchy. Nelofer recalled the pro-communist speech by Dr. Anahita Ratebzada in her school. The latter was an enthusiastic supporter of the communist party. She became the secretary of education under the PDPA because she was Babrak Karmal's mistress. The Soviets intended to gain women's support through providing educational and employment opportunities to them.

The big exception was Zakia. She did support work outside the house, since it made her financially independent, but she also believed that working alongside men in an enclosed space was problematic and could lead to illegitimate relationships. In Afghani

society, women's sexuality is considered taboo and extramarital relationship punishable by death. Work desegregation made it easier for women and men to mix. Of course, not every Afghani man and woman engaged in extramarital relationship, but one case was enough for families to prohibit women from working. Both male and female elders viewed women's identity in terms of family and community; therefore, honor was central to them. This led some to disengage from society. Some refused to work, while others joined the Mujahidin to fight against Russians. Whether women helped the Mujahidin or smuggled people, they all engaged in work, but this type of activity symbolized resistance against the enemy of Islam, not just a job that earned income.

Besides enjoying new educational and employment opportunities, women also had the freedom to unveil and adapt to a less modest form of dress. Alima, Anahita, Farzana, and Rabya believed that women's piety was in no way related to the way women dressed. They argued that women were pious as long as they believed in God internally. Some of them even stated that the veil was not required in Islam, and that they had the choice to either veil or unveil. These women had relatives and friends who veiled, while they did not. They all embraced the freedom of expression they had under the Soviets. This was their way of resisting the inhibiting feature of patriarchal society. The burqa, which was a much more conservative form of veil, had the most negative connotation among city dwellers. The memoir writer Zoya recalled being afraid of women who wore it because it was associated with women from far-away villages, prostitutes and beggars.

Among all my interviewees, Zakia stood out as the most conservative. She stated that the veil was necessary for Muslim women and she was the only one among the

interviewees who wore a veil under the Soviets. For her, the veil was a symbol of resistance against more “modern” forms of dress introduced by the Soviets. Many other women engaged in those silent forms of resistance. Zoya’s mother, a member of RAWA, used the burqa as a shield to disseminate anti-Soviet intelligence. Nelofer’s perspective about modesty also changed over time. Mini-skirts became symbols of Soviet oppression for her, and she adopted a more modest clothing to mark her opposition. In conclusion, some women expressed their agency either by voluntarily embracing Soviet modern dress, or by adopting more traditional forms of dress. In either way, they made a political statement about their identity and place in the new order.

Under the Taliban Rule

The memoirs and interviews provided invaluable information about the conditions of women under the Taliban. In general, women had varying opinions about the Soviets when it came to their system of education, but in the case of the Taliban, they all resented their educational reforms. Latifa graduated from high school the same year the Taliban took control of Kabul. She was forced to give up her dream of becoming a journalist and stayed at home for almost five years. The Taliban’s brutality engendered fear and many courageous women resisted underground. They opened schools in their own homes and taught secular subjects to next generation. When the Taliban invaded their homes, they pretended to recite the Qur’an, since for the Taliban, Qur’anic memorization was the only acceptable subject for girls. The Taliban’s segregation of women created an opportunity for them to build support networks. Additionally, some women opened literacy classes not only for children, but also for women who had never had the opportunity to obtain an

education. Other women taught their kids at home. Rabya recalled reading stories to her children at night because it was safer. These women resisted to defeat the Taliban and education was one of the tools they used to triumph. Their participation in the resistance against the Taliban is an excellent indication of their political autonomy and agency in the public sphere.

Women's elimination from the public sector had critical consequences. My fieldwork as well as my analysis of Latifa and Zoya's memoirs show that the prohibition of women from work was catastrophic and that both men and women considered the Taliban's treatment of women unfair and ferocious. Female employment was not available. Women had to come up with new ways to support their families. Some used their domestic skills to work at home: they sew clothes, baked and made other items that were sold in the market by their husbands or children. Others were forced to beg in the streets or in brothels to survive. Most of the female educators taught in the underground schools for a small amount of money; some did it for free. Female doctors also treated patients without compensation.

The Taliban did not only restrict women's movement through prohibiting education and work, but also they enforced a more restrictive dress that most women found offensive and humiliating. The interviewees, Alima, Anahita, Farzana, and Rabya found the burqa un-Qur'anic. They declared that the veil was a choice not an obligation. Even Zakia, who believed that the veil was a religious requirement, considered that the burqa and restrictive clothing enforced by the Taliban were offensive to women. For her, the burqa completely concealed a woman's identity. The punishment for not wearing a burqa was cruel and women wore it out of fear. However, women also used the burwa as

a tool to resist the Taliban. They wore makeup, nail polish, and bright color clothes underneath it, and they used it to work. Zoya who was a member of RAWA worked for a newspaper and she put on the burqa to hide her identity to report on Taliban's brutality. On the outside it looked like women wore the burqa as evidence of their submission, but in fact they used it to protest in silence.

C. Factors

The factors that influenced most women's perspectives on the Soviet rule and Taliban were geography and family history. The women's geographical location played a critical role in their worldviews. Alima, Anahita, Rabya, and Fazana were from urban areas, while Zakia was born and raised in the countryside. Women from the urban areas offered similar views on Soviet modernization and its effects. They supported the Soviet reforms and considered them to be beneficial for women. Zakia was from a rural area and she offered the opposite view. She considered the reforms harmful to the Afghani society. In a way, Zakia challenged the viewpoint of her urban sisters, who were more liberal and more accustomed to diversity of customs and dialects. However, Zoya's and Nelofer's memoirs shared Zakia's viewpoint about the Soviets, despite the fact that both Zoya and Nelofer were from Kabul.

Interestingly, geography had no influence on women's condemnation of the Taliban's extreme and un-Islamic policies. Without exception, all of them opposed Taliban ideology. However, Zakia and Zoya were the least shocked by the Taliban's extreme interpretation of women's role in the public space and modesty. Zakia suffered less from their restrictive policies because she came from a conservative family in

Kandahar, where the population is less diverse. Both Zoya and Zakia believed that full veil and other gendered policies were extreme and that the Taliban should be opposed.

D. Conclusion

The goal of the study was to deconstruct the image of Afghani women as oppressed and introduce a new perspective on the ways women maintained their autonomy and agency under patriarchal and foreign oppression. This study contributes to the contemporary literature about Muslim women's activism. It also furthers the scholarship by comparing the Soviet and the Taliban rule. The interviewees and the memoirs provided first-hand testimony, and they challenge the notion of Afghani women as victims in need of saving. Afghani women were the agents of change in their society, not their foreign liberators. Afghani women maintained their autonomy both under the Soviets and the Taliban through their activism and courage.

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APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE

Alima

1. What age group do you belong to? (Circle One)

20-30 30-40 40-50 50-60 60-70

2. What is your ethnicity? (Circle One)

Tajik Hazara Pashtun Uzbek Turkmen Other

3. What is your level of education? (Circle One)

Some School High School Associated/Technical Degree
Bachelor Degree Master Degree/Higher

4. What is your occupation?

Chemical Engineer

5. Your birthplace and primary language?

Mazar-e-Sharif Afghanistan, Dari

Rabya

1. What age group do you belong to? (Circle One)

20-30 30-40 40-50 50-60 60-70

2. What is your ethnicity? (Circle One)

Tajik Hazara Pashtun Uzbek Turkmen Other

3. What is your level of education? (Circle One)

Some School High School Associated/Technical Degree
Bachelor Degree Master Degree/Higher

4. What is your occupation?

Textile Technician

5. Your birthplace and primary language?

Kabul, Dari

Farzana

1. What age group do you belong to? (Circle One)

20-30

30-40

40-50

50-60

60-70

2. What is your ethnicity? (Circle One)

Tajik

Hazara

Pashtun

Uzbek

Turkmen

Other

3. What is your level of education? (Circle One)

Some School

High School

Associated/Technical Degree

Bachelor Degree

Master Degree/Higher

4. What is your occupation?

Accountant

5. Your birthplace and primary language?

Kabul, Dari

Zakia

1. What age group do you belong to? (Circle One)

20-30

30-40

40-50

50-60

60-70

2. What is your ethnicity? (Circle One)

Tajik

Hazara

Pashtun

Uzbek

Turkmen

Other

3. What is your level of education? (Circle One)

Some School

High School

Associated/Technical Degree

Bachelor Degree

Master Degree/Higher

4. What is your occupation?

Housewife

5. Your birthplace and primary language?

Kandahar, Pashto

Anahita

1. What age group do you belong to? (Circle One)

20-30 30-40 40-50 50-60 60-70

2. What is your ethnicity? (Circle One)

Tajik Hazara Pashtun Uzbek Turkmen Other

3. What is your level of education? (Circle One)

Some School High School Associated/Technical Degree

Bachelor Degree Master Degree/Higher

4. What is your occupation?

Medical Doctor

5. Your birthplace and primary language?

Kabul, Dari

APPENDIX B

MEMOIRS

Zoya's Story written in collaboration of Shekeba Hachemi

Zoya recalled an event, when a Russian woman offered her a chocolate, but Zoya remembered her grandmother's warning not to accept anything from the Russians, because they were enemies of Afghani people. Growing up, she was homeschooled, because her parents believed that the public schools' curriculum was corrupt. Zoya's mother and father were members of organizations that opposed the communist government and the Soviets. She recalled the day her father left the house, and never came back. The communist government also killed Zoya's mother. Zoya and her grandmother escaped to Pakistan, where she studied at a RAWA school. Zoya became a member of RAWA, and described her first task at a refugee camp, where she distributed goods to people and taught children. Zoya also traveled to Afghanistan during the Taliban rule. She gathered information about the Taliban's brutality and recorded them for a newspaper.

A Bed of Red Flower by Nelofer Pazira

Nelofer Pazira was born in 1973 in India. Nelofer grew up in Kabul and was only five years old when the communists took power. Her father was a doctor, and her mother was a teacher. Nelofer had one sister and one brother. As a child she witnessed her father being in prison for his political opinion. Her attitude toward the communist government was closely tied to her family and especially her father, who opposed the PDPA policies. At eleven, Nelofer and her friends threw stones at Russian tanks in the streets of Kabul. In 1988, Nelofer and her family escaped to Pakistan and later to Canada. She wrote *A Bed of Red Flowers* in 2006, to describe her life under the Soviets, because she grew up

resisting the secular policies enforced by the communist government that were oppressive to Muslim women. The book's main points were the following: the PDPA government established a Soviet based policies that opposed Islamic ideals, women were forced to accept communism if they wanted to achieve a higher status in the public sphere, and the public school education aimed at training future communists.

My Forbidden Face edited by William Morrow

Latifa was born in the city of Kabul in 1980. Growing up Latifa had a relatively good life. Her father ran an import business, while her mother worked at a hospital. She had two brothers and two sisters. Her older sister was married and lived in Pakistan; while her older sister was a flight attendant. Her older brother lived in India and her younger brother was an economic major in college. Latifa described her family's life as a happy, religious, but relatively liberal one. In 1996, when the Taliban took over Kabul, her life was turned upside down. Latifa dreamed of becoming a journalist, but with the Taliban in power, journalism remained just a dream. According to her, the Taliban's treatment of women was horrific according to Latifa. She witnessed the Taliban beating women for not wearing proper attire and helped girls who were raped by the Taliban members. Latifa and her family were tired of seeing children growing up without education. Latifa established an underground school in her house and defied the Taliban's ban of education. In May 2011, she along with her mother and father escaped to Pakistan and from there they flew to Paris, where she told the world about the state of women under the Taliban.