

Where is the 'W' factor? Women and the war on Afghanistan

By Fadia Faqir,

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Since 11 September, the images of the war against terror which have been presented to us by the hegemonic western media are predominantly masculine on all sides: George Bush, Colin Powell, Tony Blair, Mohammad Atta, Osama Bin Laden and the male soldiers launching the missiles to smoke out the terrorist. Again and again men have appeared on our TV screens, flexing their muscles, raising their rhetoric to put fear in the heart of their enemy.

The terrorists may still be hiding out in caves, but the caveman mentality is widespread among all the participants in this war. They think that this conflict, which is getting wider and more serious by the minute, cannot be resolved except through military action.

The traditional military is commonly regarded as the paradigmatic model of masculine organisation. The behavioural codes, activities and objectives of military organisation have assumed masculinity as a basic value. It is an old ideology and institution which was/is created, propagated and held high by men, mostly between the ages of 20-30.

Women soldiers and supporters of war do exist, but studies on women and the military show they are still in a minority. In 1990 women soldiers accounted for 11% of the world's military – most in western countries. Some feminists argue that women should take part in war if not to combat discrimination and exclusion, then to profit economically from this mighty machine.

In the collective imagination, however, women are the source of mediation and dialogue, guarantors of domestic tranquillity in a competitive world, bearers of life, rather than death. Women have for centuries been purveyors and custodians of the positive values of peace and meekness on behalf of society as a whole.

This image of femininity tallies with the poll results published recently by the British newspaper the Guardian. This shows a marked difference between the views of women and those of men. The gender gap was clear 74% of men support air strikes, while only 58% of women do. Indeed 32% of women opposed any military action. Polls in both the 1990 Gulf war and the 1999 Kosovo war showed the same gender gap.

Women in the West – lost in a rhetorical fog

Women are still 'the nurturers' it seems. They are still reluctant to engage in acts of violence in far away lands, still unwilling to send their sons to fight in an ill-defined and possibly long war. What is puzzling, though, is that this difference in opinion between the two genders has been lost in the fog of rhetoric, in Britain at least.

Women's views and those outside the mainstream of politics do not seem to be represented even by women Members of Parliament, let alone the mainstream media. The only voice that is

being aired and heard is that of the male of the species. Men dominate the debate, shaping our understanding of it and pushing the views of women and others to the margins of discussion.

Indeed, rather than shaping public opinion, women seem to gradually being influenced by it. In less than a month the gender gap was bridged. Women who oppose war in this country have either changed their minds or begun appeasing the patriarch. Some argue that women's voices in the media are few and far between, which in itself reflects the bias of a male-dominated society.

But we women also carry responsibility for our actions. We are the ones who end up acquiescing to our men's position. We are the ones who send them off to war, waving our scarves and blowing them kisses in the air. Virginia Woolf describes women as mirrors, which reflect the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power war would be without glory, she wrote. Men may make war, but they could not have done so had women not been so uncritical of their efforts.

Women in the Muslim world – doubly dispossessed

On the other side of the divide Muslim women do not glory either in war or in the men responsible for it. In Afghanistan, the war monster has been swallowing their children ever since the Russians invaded. Women in the Muslim world have no illusions about war. They have suffered the devastating effects of wars and civil wars far too often.

But throughout the Muslim world, women are completely outside-decision making circles. There are not even any truly democratic governments in Islamic countries. Whatever their sex, citizens of the Muslim world do not enjoy many political, civil and social rights; they are even, in some cases, held hostage by the state and are the objects of its capricious and ever-present violence. They have been brutalised and stripped of their dignity and have no means to express their anger.

Some would argue that the attack on America is an internal conflict with oppressive regimes that turned transnational and combusted in New York. In most Muslim countries female citizens are still less equal than their male counterparts; they are second-class citizens, dependent and subordinate. There is a set of specific discriminatory practices, which apply only to women. Thus women suffer the double jeopardy of living under theocratic, oppressive regimes and of being women.

As a result women have no say over whether their country should go to war or not. Saddam Hussein did not consult the women of Iraq whom his speeches exalt before invading Kuwait in 1990. They just wait for their sons to come back from the chambers of the secret police or the frontline, in both cases broken. Hands on heart they sit and watch yet another cycle of violence unfold.

Any her/story, as opposed to his/story, show that women refuse to participate in the obscene acts of violence and are cynical about any ideology which glorifies war and warlords. They try to clean up after an attack, dress up the wounds, cook the food and look for their loved ones. Women try to create some kind of normalcy amid the chaos.

Under the Taliban regime, Afghani women suffered violence in a myriad of forms, ranging from wife abuse to rape, dowry killings, acid throwing, sexual harassment and sexual slavery. State indifference, discriminatory laws and the gender bias of much of the country's legal justice system – if we can call it that – ensured virtual impunity of perpetrators.

But since these atrocities and violations of women's human rights – and those elsewhere in so much of the Muslim world – were committed miles away, beyond our ever decreasing circle of compassion, the west was able to successfully ignore them. Until that evil arrived right on our doorstep.

The West in confusion

Only after 11 September did the west 'discover' how Muslim women suffer at the hands of monolithic, monological, monotheistic regimes. 'Liberal' western newspapers began parading Afghani women and their daughters as the 'silent victims', not of America's war on terror, but of their menfolk. Suddenly the newly-discovered oppression of Afghani women became a justification for operation 'Infinite Justice', even by the most chauvinist male journalist.

The West, which had managed thus far to turn a blind eye to the plight of Muslim women, came to its senses the moment the same violence was unleashed on western men and women. It took western faces to be burned for the urgent message, sent years ago, finally to arrive home. Violence, which is perpetrated in other parts of the world, can cross borders easily in this cyber age and must not be ignored.

So the white male, in his shining armour, finally decided to protect Muslim maidens from their oppressive regimes. And the high-tech war began in vengeance. But hold your horses, white colonialist male! There are many other damsels in distress in the Muslim world today, mainly victims of your staunch allies.

The Pakistani government, which served as the main US ally in the war against the Taliban, does not support its female subjects. Every year in Pakistan hundreds of women, of all ages and in all parts of the country, are reported killed in the name of 'honour'. The lives of millions of women in Pakistan are circumscribed by tradition, which enforce extreme seclusion and submission to men, many of whom impose their virtually proprietorial control with violence.

Moreover, in Saudi Arabia – another staunch ally of the United States – the Committee for the Protections of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has gained in power and stature in the past few years. Women in Saudi are whipped for minor offences like showing a wrist or an ankle in public; they cannot drive; they cannot travel without a male guardian; and they need permission from their husband to get a job or pursue their education. Women in Jordan – yet another close partner of the west – and elsewhere in the Arab world get killed for alleged crimes of 'honour' on the basis of a mere rumour.

Women's Common Ground

What emerges from a comparison of the position of western and Muslim women on this war is the common ground between them. Most women, western and Muslim, are opposed to war regardless of its reasons and objectives.

Muslim women are completely outside the circles of decision-making and cannot influence their governments over important issues. Western women, who began moving into the corridors of power, seem still to be on the margins and unable to shape the views of the majority. Both western women and Muslim women lack the power to shape the future of the world.

In the Muslim world you have corrupt ruling elites and equally corrupt undemocratic opposition forces working under patriarchal structures. Modern history, recorded by men, has created images of male heroes fighting colonial wars. While images of male soldier-citizens endure, women are excluded from all significant historical events.

Ironically, this exclusion looks set to become a source of political power for women. For women in the Muslim world are 'innocent', they were not involved in decisions which led to cyclical violence. If there is a third alternative to the two groups currently waging violence, it is the silent majority, most of whom are women. Paradoxically the fact that Afghani women were pushed out of the public space makes them a viable future opposition and credible prospective political partners.

Shaping a Feminine Future?

Men have mostly run the world, which has moved onto new levels of terror and violence. The inner gender of the state has been masculine and its instruments of coercion so far have been disproportionately male. The question for the future is whether a real feminisation of the state would change its violent masculine nature.

The majority of women are concerned with emancipation, freedom (personal and civic), human rights, power sharing, integrity, dignity, equality, autonomy, power-sharing, liberation and pluralism. Some argue that adopting these values and having more women in the circles of power will ultimately lead to solving disputes and reducing armed conflicts.

As Ali Mazrui argues, God and gold have never provided adequate foundations for social justice. The missing 'g' is gender, the missing 'w' is women. The history of the 20th century is full of examples of wars and destruction wreaked by the masculine state. The 'w' factor has never been more urgently needed.

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