

Analyzing Afghanistan's Conflict Since (2001) and Its Effect on Women's Empowerment and Education through Feminist Standpoint Theory

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Abstract

This Paper analyzes the Afghanistan conflict and its effect on women's empowerment and girls' education using the feminist standpoint theory. Over the past 20 years international community, the United States, and the Afghan government collectively worked toward girls' access to education, women's empowerment, and peacebuilding in Afghanistan. However, after the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan and the empowerment of the Taliban, everything changed back to 2001. The 20 years of work toward girls' education and women's empowerment just disappeared and the policies did not sustain either.

The study contextualized the Afghanistan conflict through feminist standpoint theory focusing on the importance of women's perspectives and standpoints during peacebuilding. Highlighted the significant role education plays in sustainable peacebuilding and women's empowerment.

Feminist standpoint theory in the conflict in Afghanistan since 2001 explains how the Patriarchal norms systemically marginalized women by excluding them from education, employment, and decision-making at all levels. The international community and Afghanistan government's approaches toward peacebuilding and women's empowerment did not fit the norms and ignored women's standpoint and uniqueness, therefore, resulting in a full gender-blind education system after political change.

This paper concludes that feminist standpoint theory is crucial to understanding the complex gender dynamics in the patriarchal background and conflict. Therefore, considering women's standpoint, (level of education, social and cultural background, marital status) is not only vital in conflict management but in the development of education policies to mitigate conflict impact on education, especially girls' education. Meanwhile, women's standpoint in peacebuilding is also vital as the conflict in Afghanistan highly affects women, and their rights to education, employment, and decision-making.

Keywords: Conflict, Women's empowerment, Education, Feminism, Peacebuilding, Standpoint

1. Introduction

Conflict in Afghanistan has a deep-rooted history and different forms, however, the conflict between 2001 and 2024 stands as the most significant. In 2001, the International Coalition with the support of the USA as part of peace bringing to Afghanistan, took the country from the Taliban and formed a new government system. After 20 years of work toward Afghanistan's sustainable peace development, Afghanistan reached back to the starting point (iwm.org, 2023).

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In 2001 Afghanistan was officially free from the Taliban, therefore, in 2014 Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) were assigned as the main security force for Afghanistan however, due to significant challenges in security management, the Taliban started their continuous attacks in different provinces, which left thousands of deaths, injuries and internal and external migrations behind during this time. After nonstop attacks and bomb blasts in almost all provinces of Afghanistan, in 2018 some of the provinces (Farah and Ghazni) were already in control of the Taliban for several weeks. Once the security issues around the country got out of control of all the collective work toward peacebuilding, in 2020 the official negotiations with the Taliban started in Duha which led to the agreement of US withdrawal from Afghanistan (Center for Preventive Action, 2021).

However, the agreement did not sustain even before the full withdrawal of US forces. As half of the US forces and international organizations workers were still in Afghanistan but the Taliban took over the country which again led to a huge number of Afghanistan citizens migrating to different countries around the world, schools and universities for girls were changed to Islamic studies Madrasas and women got officially ban from working (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2021). However, from 2001 till 2021 the new changes were in favor of women and girls, and during the girls' school enrollment rate reached its highest level, women's role in the workplace was visible, and women's empowerment was seen in the government and non-governmental organizations (Center for Preventive Action, 2021).

However, what went wrong during the 20 years of work toward reconstructing Afghanistan with a sustainable peace is the question for every individual in Afghanistan and those who migrated to other countries. Afghan citizens paid a high cost for 20 years of conflict to come to an end however, The available data and reports indicate that

“After more than four decades of conflict and instability in Afghanistan, an estimated 28.3 million Afghans - two-thirds of the population, including women and girls - are in need of humanitarian and protection assistance. More than 1.6 million Afghans have fled the country since 2021, bringing the total number of Afghans in neighboring countries to 8.2 million since the start of the conflict” (UNHCR,2023).

Meanwhile, as per BBC News on UNICEF report, around 1.4 million Afghan girls in Afghanistan have been affected due to a band on all forms of education for girls in Afghanistan by the new government (Taliban) since 2021 (Farzan and Drury, 2024). Women's exclusion in public spaces is increasing day by day as per the APnews “The Taliban's education ministry marked the start of the new academic year with a ceremony that female journalists were not allowed to attend”(Faiez,2024)

Furthermore, “Since invading Afghanistan in 2001, the United States has spent \$2.313 trillion on the war, which includes operations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan” (Brown University, 2021). Around 47,600 Afghan civilians lost their lives during the 20 years of conflict (Saif, 2021). To explore the answer to what went wrong over the 20 years of conflict in Afghanistan, which resulted in the full exclusion of girls from schools, universities, workplaces, and social involvement.

2. Methodology

The secondary data analysis method is used to analyze the Conflict in Afghanistan Since (2001). and it's Effect on Women's empowerment and education. This research used secondary sources as to effectively

contextualize with available comprehensive data. Under the pressure of The Current government of Afghanistan, respondents are afraid to provide information on girls' access to education, education policies, and how the conflict-affected girls' access to education. Therefore, this research considered secondary data sources. as the secondary data sources have rich and valuable information. The feminism standpoint theory has been applied and contextualized in the Afghanistan conflict over 23 years with its effect on women's education. The secondary data, includes journal articles, books, official news, organization reports, and academically researched papers and journals.

Research Objectives

1. To raise the importance of women's standpoint in peacebuilding and peace sustainability in the 20 years of conflict in Afghanistan.
2. To analyze the effects of the 20-year conflict in Afghanistan on girls' education and women's empowerment.
3. To attract researchers and policymakers to further analyze women's standpoint for their peacebuilding and conflict management

3. Background

The conflict in Afghanistan since 2001 left many of us with several lessons learned that may help us understand the conflict and its effect on education and women's empowerment. Firstly, the peacebuilding approaches did not consider women's standpoint in Afghanistan which can be well explained through feminism theories (Sobat, 2022) The second is Education is a weapon for women to fight against exclusions from the workplace, education, and social spaces. However, women were continuously excluded from leadership and decision-making roles (Gonnella, 2022). As Enloe also her book "twelve feminist Lessons of War" mentioned educated women in the war in Afghanistan, Ukraine, and other countries would have experienced war differently(Enloe, 2023). For example, women suffered three times more than men at the war time, because of their limited education or no education. A high number of women in Afghanistan lost their male members in the war and at very young ages with no education got the responsibility for their children which highly challenged their well-being and left them with the trauma of war. while women with a level of education managed to survive and access income (Global History Dialogues,2023). Thirdly educated women play a significant role in sustainable peacebuilding approaches (Enloe, 2023). Fourthly, the standpoint of women is vital for Policies toward inclusive education, gender balance, and women's empowerment (Smith, 2002).

4. The Feminist Approach to the Afghanistan Conflict

Feminism as an inclusive approach focuses on the gendered aspects of conflict, focusing on the experiences of women and other marginalized identities in Afghanistan. In the Afghanistan conflict, the role of patriarchal norms negatively impacted women and resulted in exclusion from education, employment, and political participation (UN Women, 2022). Therefore, it was claimed that "The international community should ensure that parties to conflict respect the core principle of inclusivity, including women's active participation in the peace process and use different channels to ensure they are integrated into the discussions and have meaningful roles" (Azadmanesh and Ghafoori, 2020,p.9). Women standpoint is also one of the important

approaches for the peacebuilding as feminist standpoint theory focuses on the position one has within the social structure, believing that each person has unique needs and positions therefore, any generalizations based on gender, sex, age, social identity, or political power may lead to the exclusion of these groups (Gurung, 2020). Indeed, in the Duha agreement which was based on international policies, women were not seen as real participants but they were the listeners, and none of the concerns that women raised were seen after the agreement's finalization (Koofi, 2022). Certainly, it is to agree with the claim of feminists that "gender inequality could be attributed largely to women's exclusion from the processes of development and access to education and market economics" (Sjoberg and Tickner, 2012,p.181).

5. Effect of Conflict on Girls' Education

The never-ending conflict in Afghanistan opened the door to gender-based exclusion and gender-based violence and resulted in the systemic exclusion of women and girls from education by creating several barriers to accessing education. In 2019 around 39 million girls were excluded from primary and secondary education due to conflict and insecurities (Rodriguez, 2019). UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore said "The senseless attacks on schools; the killing, injury, and abduction of teachers; and the threats against education are destroying the hopes and dreams of an entire generation of children" (Diallo, 2019). When the Taliban first government excluded girls from education for five years of their government, the 20 years of work toward girls' access to education and women empowerment projects with huge budgets were not able to fill the gap. As the data indicates most of the schools in Afghanistan lacked qualified teachers, The government had open posts for women but the qualifications of women did not fit the job criteria (Batha ,2021). Moreover as per the SIGAR reports United States' \$1.3 billion investment in Afghanistan contributed to significant improvements in the Afghan education sector from 2001 to August 2021" (Sopko, 2023) What now? Again girls are banned from all forms of education and how many more years from now it will take to fill this gap? (United Nation, 2023). It is important to learn from what went wrong and consider more sustainable approaches toward peacebuilding through education.

6. Role of Education in Sustainable Peace

Research indicates that education plays a significant role the sustainable peacebuilding, and promotes a clear understanding of different norms, beliefs, and ideologies which leads to reduced violence (Afshaneh, 2023). However, in the case of Afghanistan, the research indicates that around 3.7 million children ages 7 and 17 do not have access to education due to security issues and the current political instability (Diallo, 2019). In the Afghan conflict, the policies and social standards were seen as one structure. Therefore, the generalizations, considering states as main actors and international anarchy resulted in all the gender equality and women empowerment policies failing after the collapse of the Afghan Government (Sopko, 2023). Afghanistan throughout history remained patriarchal, therefore, the feminism standpoint theory to the context of Afghanistan was very significant. Feminism as a complete approach with a focus on inclusive power and structure would have resulted differently after the takeover of the Taliban. If we say that women were only excluded from social and political positions after the takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan, it would be a false claim (Haqmal, 2012) Within the 20 years of the Afghanistan conflict women's exclusion were in all the government and none government areas, and the symbolic presence of women in the structure was there (Batha, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to understand education plays a significant role in peacebuilding. Enloe

in her book “Twelve Feminist Lessons of War” raised a very valid point that Afghan women paid high prices for the war, gave up their rights to social rights, rights to education, and access to resources, and went through difficult times of war faced exclusion and all form of violence. But if the women were educated, they would have experienced war differently (Enloe, 2023, p.20). Meanwhile, since 2021 Schools in Afghanistan faced a shortage of qualified teachers, however, qualified teaching is crucial not only for the quality of education but also will motivate every individual to study and contribute to the development and peacebuilding (Alice, 2016).

7. Policies and Feminist Standpoint Theory in Education

If we see the Afghanistan conflict since 2001 from feminist Standpoint, it can be said that feminist Standpoint was not applied to the policies of peacebuilding and conflict reduction to the expected level. Indeed, women’s standpoint in the conflict in Afghanistan plays a very significant role. The core belief of feminism is to explain that women are part of the social world therefore, as other members of the world they need equal social, economic, and political rights and freedom (Soken, 2022). Shulamit Reinharz in his book (Feminist Methods in Social Research) claimed that “the aim of feminism is making the invisible visible, bringing women’s lives to the center, rendering the trivial important, putting the spotlight on women as competent actors, and understanding women as subjects rather than objects” (Reinharz, 1992, p.248)

The lessons learned report by the US from the gender equality and women empowerment policies and projects also indicates that some of the gender equality strategies did not consider well the social and cultural history of Afghanistan which is why most of the activities and initiatives are challenged by the new government (Sopko, 2021, p.42). Access to education applied the generalized rule and did not consider the standpoint of women in male-dominated cultural context therefore the girls as a marginalized identity never fitted the policies toward inclusive education (Haqmal, 2012)

Moreover, feminism gives high importance to the power structures and how marginalized identities are within these structures (Reinharz, 1992). This fits the conflict in Afghanistan where the power structures highly excluded the ethnic and religious minorities, women and girls and other gender identities needs during 20 years of conflict management. The right example of a feminist Standpoint in Afghanistan conflict management can be the advocacy for women’s rights and women empowerment projects of international organizations, where the international organizations highly considered the importance of women’s standpoint through different projects worked toward women’s inclusion in education, healthcare, and political decision-making (UN Women, 2022).

8. Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that the conflict in Afghanistan from 2001 to the current time is very complex. While its effect on education especially girls’ education is huge. The never-ending conflict in Afghanistan despite many efforts by regional and global actors, the international community, and funding donors toward peace establishment had no result but the situation remained unstable and followed different forms of violence, insecurities, and external and internal migration, social and political exclusion of gendered minorities and women.

Feminism Standpoint in the conflict of Afghanistan can explain the complexity of gendered and marginalized groups' roles in conflict. It can be said that despite the collective work of the international community, human rights organizations, and state and non-state actors toward the inclusion and promotion of women's rights in peace-building and decision-making, visible outcomes would have not been there. However, considering the women's standpoint in a country with men dominant history would make a different result.

Applying Feminist Standpoint in education and access to educational facilities which are mostly women-centered or based on women's standpoints may have constructed a better future for girls' education considering the social and cultural norms of Afghanistan are mostly male-dominated. Therefore, hegemonizing women and their standpoints may not effectively be able to signify the role of women in the conflict resolution and decision-making process in the conflict. Therefore, some violence and women's exclusion from decision-making from the household level to the social and political level were part of Afghanistan's well-known practices since 2001 and continued for 20 years until the Taliban made it move in a different direction. Indeed, access to any form of education is restricted by the Taliban since 2021 and women in Afghanistan have been protesting for their education rights and approaching international organizations and the international community for the past three years however, there is no action from any of the international organization and regional and international actors toward girls education in Afghanistan (Congressional Research Service, 2023). This research findings indicate that , If the international community does not negotiate girls' access to education with the Afghanistan government and develop a clear policy toward girls' education considering Afghan women's standpoint, Afghanistan will again face a shortage of female-qualified teachers and professionals in the workplace.

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