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## Organized Women in Afghanistan: the Key to a Universal Understanding of Human Rights

*Stephanie Hinkle*

The country of Afghanistan is in the forefront of international attention due to the recently launched war against terrorism. This is causing many misconceived generalizations about Islam and Afghanistan to be forced to the surface of the American public's consciousness. For many years, the religion of Islam, specifically that of Arab Muslims, has been viewed as being anti-American and has been identified with a basic disregard for human rights. Recently, more serious problems have emerged associating the Islamic religion with the violence and hatred displayed in terrorist actions. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks created the undeniable assumption in America that these acts were supported by the entire Muslim community and by the country of Afghanistan. This stems from a common belief that all Muslims support the violation of human rights, especially those against women. Although educating people may alleviate some of the stereotypes about the Muslim community, a mere understanding of Islamic theology cannot erase the stigma created by a small segment of Afghani society as there are many social, cultural and political dynamics also at play. In the academic world, a serious concern has developed that Americans view Muslims as a community who do not share common beliefs and views on the terrorist attacks. By extension, the notion that all people in Afghanistan support the violence against women that has taken place over the last thirty years. To prevent the perpetuation of hatred between religions, cultures and creeds, it is essential that those who have formed preconceived notions about the Muslim people in Afghanistan develop an awareness of their false perceptions of Islam and Afghanistan. The American people need to recognize that their opinions have been based solely upon the socio-political structure of Afghanistan under the rule of Islamic Fundamentalist groups who use Islam to justify their actions as terrorists and human rights abusers. The entire human race must recognize the

religion, specifically Islam, is not interpreted the same way by all its followers. The failure to grasp this concept will inevitably lead to more violence, war, and death, simply because of a lack of understanding and respect for all religions.

A predominant issue, when considering the Muslim fundamentalist leaders and governments such as the Taliban, is their disregard for women's rights. The violations of women's rights in Afghanistan by the Muslim government have led to the establishment of women's organizations that continually struggle to attain basic human rights for women that are being brutally denied. The views of women in these organizations run contrary to those of the Taliban and present Islamic governments, and like many Muslims they strongly support the Western notion of human rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was adopted in December 1948 by all members of the United Nations. This document was declared the "Magna Carta of all Humanity", and it calls for each individual and every state to take responsibility for the realization and effective protection of human rights as they are defined.<sup>(i)</sup> Because the Taliban and other Muslim regimes have denied Afghan citizens civil and political rights, women's views on Islam and human rights have not been heard by the rest of the world, resulting in the misconception that all Muslims view human rights the same way. On many levels, hearing the voices of women in Afghanistan and other Muslim countries is critical in establishing awareness that the views of fundamentalist governments do not represent the beliefs of all Muslims. By looking at Islamic views through the eyes of women in Afghanistan, it becomes clear how Islam is deceptively being used in a political fashion to justify the abuses of women's rights. Their views disprove/prove the argument that human rights cannot be interpreted in a relative framework, one that can be applied differently to each individual based on culture, religion, and nationality; many Muslims share a universal conception of human rights. By incorporating Muslim views of human rights other than those of the fundamentalist governments, whose views the world is most commonly exposed to, it is possible to come to a consensus between Muslims and the West on the issue of human rights and how rights are inherent to every human being.

Available literature that discusses the struggles of women and the work of women's organizations in Muslim countries, such as that of the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA), does not get at the heart of the identity and the beliefs of many women who have been victims of violence. It must be made clear how women such as those who support RAWA define themselves as women, as Afghans, and especially as Muslims so that many of the misconceptions that exist about Islam may be clarified. The study of Muslim women's

groups is significant for the cause of the women in countries like Afghanistan who are fighting for basic human rights; it is also consequential in establishing an awareness of the common thread that runs through all of humanity concerning the morality of human rights. Universal ideals of human rights can be conceptualized and attained even under an Islamic context as demonstrated by Muslim women who struggle relentlessly for their own equality, acknowledge the need for universal human rights standards in a world that too often uses religion to degrade the value of what it means to be a human being.

### Opposing Views of Human Rights

When studying human rights in the Muslim world, it is first essential that one have an understanding of the Western and the Islamic views of human rights and the influence of religion on each. From a Muslim perspective, rights are viewed as owned by God and individuals are defined by their relationships to God.(2) For Muslims, human rights are viewed as a human obligation or duty to the community. Such a different interpretation sets Islamic thought on human rights apart from Western understandings in the sense that it emphasizes the relationship between rights and duties as well as the pervasiveness of Divine Law.(3) In Islam, collectivism and community are placed above the individual, whereas the West maintains the individual and the idea of rational humanism the center of the human rights discourse. Fourteen hundred years ago when Islam was founded, certain rights were presumed to be given to Muslims by the Divine Right that have continued to remain a part of Muslim human rights discourse. According to Islam, each human being should be given the right to life, to safety of life, to respect for the chastity of women, to a basic standard of life, to freedom, to justice and to equality. These rights are stated in the Holy Quran as a Muslim's duty as a human being to fulfill these obligations to themselves and to others.(4)

The Western concept of a human right is outlined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which is a document that represents the way in which America specifically views human rights. Although the 58 states that came together to create the document in 1948 varied in their ideologies, political systems and religious and cultural backgrounds and had different patterns of socio-economic development, "the Universal Declaration of Human Rights represented a common statement of goals and aspirations — a vision of the world as the international community would want it to become."(5) The Declaration recognizes "the inherent dignity of all people of the world is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" and is linked to the recognition of fundamental rights towards which every

human being aspires. These inherent rights include the right to life, liberty and security of person; the right to an adequate standard of living; the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution; the right to own property; the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the right to education, freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and the right to freedom from torture and degrading treatment, among others. America views these as inherent rights to be enjoyed by all human beings of the world, meaning men, women and children, and they are not a gift or a privilege to be withdrawn, withheld or granted at someone's whim or will.(6)

As the concept of human rights has been internationalized through globalization and exposure through the media, Muslims have been confronted with a conflict between their views on human rights as a duty that requires good action and the Western view of human rights as inherent parts of humanity. The West has started to impose its understanding of human rights on an international level, as seen in the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, calling the Muslim understanding of human rights to question. Muslims have been forced to find a way of giving logical and empirical validity to the notion of human rights as traditionally understood by Muslim law.(7) This is not a new challenge to the Muslim religion, as it has survived many reforms and changes in history, showing that it is indeed a flexible and universalistic religion that can adapt to change by its very nature. The views of many Muslims today are in fact in agreement with what universal human rights stand for, although their perspectives revolve more around social justice than those of individual freedom and other Western principles. The very existence of literature and religious text that defines the Islamic norms affecting rights and comparing Islam with international human rights "demonstrates that [some] Muslims believe that such comparisons are both timely and legitimate."(8)

Another important factor that plays into the debate over human rights is the way in which religious influences on structures in countries such as Afghanistan have shaped people's view on human rights. Many Muslim fundamentalist groups that are in control of countries such as Afghanistan refuse to acknowledge any validity in Western human rights discourse. In fact, they use Islamic doctrine to justify the violation of human rights, especially women's rights, which contradict the rights that are inherently granted to Muslims as stated in the Quran.(9) In order to understand the dialogue that is now taking place on an international level between the West and the Islamic world, it is essential to understand the difference between the conceptualization of human rights of Muslims who do and Muslims who do not advocate universal human rights.

A scholar of Islamic studies, Ann Mayer makes a great distinction between Muslim positions supporting Islamic fundamentalist governments and those that promote Western human rights discourse in her book entitled *Islam Tradition and Politics: Human Rights*. The most significant point in her book is that Islam does not determine all of the attitudes of individuals in the Muslim world, showing that there are many other factors that contribute to the way that Muslims view human rights besides their religion. Although Muslims rely heavily on religious principles and interpretations of Muslim sources to develop their positions, it is important to distinguish between political and religious issues in Muslim human rights discourse.<sup>(10)</sup> Mayer discusses how governments and ideologies have reinterpreted the Islamic view of legalism to their benefit, making it essential to define what Islamic law is concerning human rights and how to differentiate these moral values and perspectives from the actual laws that are in place in Muslim countries. Governments in many Muslim countries justify their human rights abuses, especially their abuse of women's rights, by referring to Islamic authority, but this is not how Muslims as a whole view human rights. Mayer argues that only individuals, and not governments, have the right to decide if Islamic sources call for a question of international human rights norms. Although finding a universal human rights doctrine that is accepted by all people seems presently unrealistic, understanding the ways in which all people view human rights as a concept brings the process closer to the establishment of a framework from which the world can work from to attain this goal.

### The Greatest Debate on Human Rights

One of the main debates in the international discourse on human rights is between the idea of universal human rights and the notion of cultural relativism. Mayer explains cultural relativism as the endorsement of the idea that all values and beliefs are tied to one particular culture and that there are no universals. Cultural relativists assume that Islamic rights discourse today is based on the authentic products of Islamic culture and they argue that all Muslims oppose Western ideas of human rights and do not want them to exist in Muslim society.<sup>(11)</sup> Mayer, and other scholars such as Mahmood Monshipouri and Abul A'la Mawdudi, promote a universal view of human rights and provide a convincing argument against cultural relativism. Their main argument is that all people, regardless of gender, race, religion or creed, share a common sense of humanity; no human being wants to see another human being suffer. Mayer accuses cultural relativists of using generalizations to defend governments that disregard human rights, such as the previous government of Ir-

an in Afghanistan, Iran rejected Western concepts of human rights and replaced them with standards that it claimed to be from authentic indigenous cultural models.<sup>(12)</sup> In the past, the United States has sympathized with cultural relativists like those in Iran who claim that their Islamic tradition and culture cannot coexist with the human rights doctrine that the West promotes, and therefore the US naively accepted the idea that a principle of Islamic exceptionalism prevailed in the realm of human rights for political reasons.<sup>(13)</sup>

By accepting the culturally relative argument, the West promoted the violation of human rights in countries like Iran, which goes against everything of which the Western human rights discourse stands. <sup>(14)</sup> A reaction such as this by the United States only fueled the arguments being made by Islamic fundamentalist relativists that Islam could justify the oppression and violation of the rights of human beings. Human rights have only come to the forefront of international attention in the last ten years, as more people have become aware of the violence and suffering of people all over the world. The newness of the topic of human rights can be partially due to globalization and the advancements in technology that allow people access to what is going on in the world. Because of the way in which this information on human rights violations becomes available, it is easy for people to make generalizations about certain cultures or religions, and this must be prevented through education.<sup>(15)</sup> It is important for the West as well as the Muslim world to "recognize some basic universal human rights for all people that inevitably exist," by separating culture and religion from the basic meaning of humanity<sup>(16)</sup>.

A relativist would argue that there cannot be a universal definition of humanity and that certain interests cannot be defined by a limited group because there are different ways that people see what is important in life, which is what makes a person human. In other words, how can you tell a human being what should be important to him or her as a human being without taking away his or her dignity that is defining of what it means to be human in the first place? Islam safeguards the individual by incorporating him or her into society and to God, where only the individual can determine what makes him or her human. In a culturally relativist argument, it has been stated that the West cannot demand that Muslim countries improve human rights if those who make these demands do not understand how Muslims define a human and a right. Critiques of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* state that it imposes Western values and notions of human rights on the Islamic culture, which is just as capable as an international human rights doctrine to uphold principals of conduct and achieve worthwhile goals such as justice, freedom and equality.<sup>(17)</sup> These arguments cannot be ignored, but they fail to rec-

recognize the concepts that do exist within Islamic discourse, and that acknowledge a common understanding of humanity, whether it is practiced or not. One cannot disregard that Islamic culture is dynamic like all other cultures, as is Islamic thinking on human rights, because of the fact that change underlies the foundation of the Muslim existence and tradition. Islam has shown that it is capable of adapting to change without losing the integrity of its authentic belief systems through major reforms, which are in fact compatible with the West's modern conception of human rights.(18)

When arguing against cultural relativism, it is important to recognize that Muslim countries are members of the *Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC)*, and this organization does endorse the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.(19) saying that human rights are only a Western concept, cultural relativists are simply trying to conceal elitism that uses distortions of Islam to maintain power at the expense of their people's rights. In actuality many oppressed Muslims do support the Western ideals of human rights, yet there is a misunderstanding that official ideologized representations of Islamic culture created by fundamentalist regimes represent authentic manifestations of indigenous culture and tradition.(20) The problem in Muslim countries that is often misunderstood is with the government and the politics, not the culture and the religion. In Mayer's study on Iran, she discusses certain lessons that should have been learned about the universality of human rights before the government started to acknowledge human rights. Human rights started to take priority on the agenda of the West in the 1990's due to an increase in violence, Iran lost much of its credibility on an international level because of its abuses of human rights, and the government started to make changes. In the new Iranian constitution, human rights were associated with goallessness, which implies that violations of human rights may stop with the establishment of a new order based on an ideal and model society on the basis of Islam.(21) In other words, an Islamic order that is unanimously supported under the unified concept of God will foster a society that values the rights of each individual equally. The preamble of the new and present constitution states that there is a common faith among Iranians with a common outlook.(22) Although some violations of human rights in Western terms still occur by the Iranian government, their constitution provides persuasive evidence that there is an underlying common understanding of human rights, which can be applied to any country regardless of the predominant religion.

While focusing on women's rights in Afghanistan, the discourses that revolve around Islam and human rights are an important factor in evaluating how

achieve human rights for women in Afghanistan, a country still controlled by a government that continues to deny that a universal concept of human rights could ever exist. The debate over human rights has been held back by cultural relativism in the sense that governments like the Taliban regime uses the religion of traditional Islam as a way to justify the denial of basic human rights to women. The government views human rights as relativistic, placing women's rights specifically in the control of Islamic culture as they have interpreted it. Ann Mayer makes a strong argument against culturally relativist Muslim regimes such as Iran by pointing out that a universal consensus on human rights can be attained simply because of the fact that traditional opponents of modern human rights, by articulating their own Islamic human rights agendas, use the language and modality of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.(23) Human rights concepts exist within contemporary societies such as Egypt, Iran, and Pakistan, which are all predominantly Muslim countries with conservative governments. Afghanistan has been controlled in the last decade by regressively conventional fundamentalist regimes that have used Islam to prevent women from having rights as well as taking away rights that were granted to them as human beings by previous governments. The preface of a universal concept of human rights exists not only among many Muslim men and women of Afghanistan, but in the Islamic discourse that comes from the fundamentalist governments in Muslim countries that use Islam to contradictorily justify the indignity and violation of its women's rights.

### History of Human Rights in Afghanistan

By focusing specifically on Afghanistan, where many different governments have violated Western standards of human rights, it is easy to see how politicized Islamic discourse has become. Human rights practices have been called in to question by the West in Afghanistan for the last several decades. A report published by Asia Watch in 1991 provides information on human rights violations within the country since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan began in 1978. The report provides an in-depth history of the Afghanistan political system and the violations of human rights that have taken place since the Soviets gained control of Afghanistan. As documented in this report and other United States and United Nations publications, there have been many violations of humanitarian law in Afghanistan since 1978 including public executions, reprisal killing, bombings of civilians, laying of land mines and militia and government abuses against civilians.(24) Other violations of human rights include arbitrary arrests with no judicial process, poor prison conditions, lack of freedom of association and speech, kidnapping and killing of the

opposition and detaining Afghan refugees. (25)

Starting in the 1970's, Afghanistan was caught in the middle of the Cold War and the United States supported the Islamic movement that was opposed to the Soviet puppet regime. Both the USSR and the US provided each side with weapons and military aid during the time that the Soviets occupied Afghanistan. The United States sided with the Islamic fundamentalist groups that were fighting to regain control of their country, and these groups represented the views of human rights that exist today in the Taliban and the newly elected government. Once the Soviets pulled out, several of these Islamic governments took control in different parts of Afghanistan and Islam was declared the official religion in the capital, Kabul, showing the denouncement of Marxism and Leninism.(26) With the support of the US, due to Cold War politics, several Islamic fundamentalist regimes came to power in Afghanistan that since have gradually taken away the rights of Afghan citizens in inhuman ways.

Since 1979, over three million people have become refugees in Pakistan and many relief workers with Western organizations have been killed. The threat against women who support the Western notion of human rights has continued to be the most potent concern for the international community. The lack of rights provided to women in the beginning of the 1990's only worsened under the Taliban regime that had control between 1996 and November 2001. Women who worked for relief agencies have received threats on their lives and some have been assassinated by members of fundamentalist groups associated with the government. Under the Taliban, women were denied the right to attend health classes, they had to wear baggy clothing, they could not wear make up, and they could not be seen in public without a male family member.(27) Many years of war against the Soviets and subsequent civil wars have left the country in ruins under the control of governments that use Islamic doctrine to deny all people, especially women, access to basic survival rights that the Quran clearly promotes. The recent American bombings have left even more devastation of the land and deaths of innocent people who are only assumed to have the same beliefs as fundamentalist Muslims. There are, however, voices of both men and women within Afghanistan that have not been heard on an international level who do subscribe to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* who are dying in the newly launched war. Understanding the history of Afghanistan and its human rights violations calls attention to national movements that are just starting to emerge in Afghanistan, which represents the voice of the Islamic Universalist ideal and has the potential to start the process of cooperation between Islam and the West in universalizing human rights.

## A Struggling Reform Movement Under Oppressive Social and Political Structures

Until recently, there has been no place for social movements in Afghanistan history; the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan has historically been constrained by two structural factors. First is the patriarchal nature of gender identities and social relations that is deeply rooted in the tribal community, and the second is the existence of a very weak central state.(28) After 1978, laws were enacted to improve the status of women through changes in family law, reform of marriage customs, and policies that encouraged female education and employment. However, these laws were never enforced due to the persistence of patriarchal structures that already existed in what was, and continues to be, a very weak state. Modernization among women is directly linked with the fight for women's rights because women all over the world are starting to speak out about gender inequalities that need to be addressed. The modernization process in Afghanistan has been very difficult due to the social structure of Afghanistan, which is oppressive of civil and political rights. The lack of a modernization movement has been at the expense of women who are trying to obtain human rights because they are not being given a voice on a social and political level to be heard by the government or the rest of the world. There is resistance to modernizing women's rights by Islamic fundamentalists, and because the state is not strong enough to effectively make any type of change, women's rights have continually been suppressed.

Because the center of social life in Afghanistan has traditionally been based on the entire family and the community as opposed to the individual, many Muslims reject the Western concept of human rights, which focus on the individual. In any case, the idea of gender equality did begin to form among women after the withdrawal of the Soviets that began the reform programs that emerged throughout the 1990's, although they were seen by many as inappropriate intrusions into family life and the structure of society. Literacy drives were organized and the Democratic Organization of Afghan women emerged with the purpose of bringing women out of seclusion to educate them and provide them with social programs. These reforms were, however, undermined by factionalism within the government and civil war that has continued in Afghanistan up until the beginning of the twenty-first century. After the Soviet occupation, women were still not allowed to participate in civil or political activities and those that did received threats, some resulting in death. The government that took control in 1992, in the midst of the civil war, discouraged the education and employment of all women and increased the restrictions on women. At this time, the wearing of the veil was instated and women were

confined to their homes.(29) These actions called for the birth of the modernization of women's groups, which continued to exist and to grow in moderation until 1996 at the start of the Taliban regime.

In 1996, the Taliban regime emerged from a group of religious students who formed the Islamic fundamentalist group that controlled over 90% of Afghanistan until recently. They formed an opposition party to the government in 1994 and they captured the capital of Kabul in September 1996, destroying the city. The group is an unconventional army of men raised in the refugee camps during the 1980 Soviet backed regime. In particular, the fact that these men were educated in poorly equipped religious schools that taught a very conservative religious doctrine, may contribute to the reason why they interpret Islam in such a way that women are viewed as sub-humans.(30) This group has no concept of modern governance, democratic or participatory rule, human rights or women's rights. The conditions under the Taliban represented some of the most inhumane of any fundamentalist Muslim government regime. The veil, one of the greatest symbols of female oppression, that the women were forced to wear was so thick that it was often times difficult to breath or see out of the screen on the face. Any type of exposure of the skin could have resulted in immediate arrest and possible execution. In addition, during the Taliban regime, there were over 40,000 widows in Afghanistan who had lost their husbands in the many years of war. The Taliban forbid women to work and many had no husband to support them, forcing them into begging and even prostitution to support themselves and their families.(31) The Taliban forbid all women from working outside the home and they closed all clinics and hospitals open to women. All women were expelled from school and institutions of higher education for women were banned.

In every sense of the way that women's rights supporters define a human being, under the Taliban women lost the right of being human. They could not show their faces to strangers, wear bright clothes, wear make up, wear shoes with heels, speak in public, or laugh out loud. Beating women for minor offenses, for example, a woman's shoe makes a noise, was common in Afghanistan.(32) Sexual crimes against women such as gang raping, lust murders, and abductions of young females were commonplace under the Taliban regime. Public executions also took place in Afghanistan for women who had gone against the laws that the Taliban had set in place for women. Women's rights in Afghanistan were continually denied and discounted by the Taliban, who claimed legitimacy in their actions through Islamic religious principles. Women who did not conform to Taliban regulations were publicly beaten or even executed in front of their own children. In 1997 the

Taliban ordered that all windows must be screened to ensure that women could not be seen from the street. The Taliban took control of the public radio and made it illegal to speak out against the government in any fashion. The entire concept of modernization was disposed of, and Islamization programs were enacted during their reign to ensure that the Taliban kept its power.

Islamization programs have also been instituted by the Islamic governments of Iran, Pakistan and Sudan. These programs are used to justify the denial of freedoms to citizens and to defend policies instituted in a new constitution. They are shaped by elites as a strategy to silence the demands for democratization and human rights by making appeals to a divine authority as the justification for oppressive rule that promotes inequality and discrimination. The programs are based on the assumption that Islamic Law must take precedence over all other considerations, and they argue that Western values and human rights are incompatible with traditional Islamic systems of governance and social structure. (33) Women in Muslim countries today endure more suffering and oppression than they ever have before, yet they continue fighting for their rights in countries that lack a social structure to support their cause and an authoritarian government that violates the essential human rights of women in the name of Islam.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban constructed patriarchal structures leading to a hostile regional and international climate that opposed the government and support the current legal status of women. Representations of women have assumed political significance in the form of political groups and cultural progress, which have signified modernity, progress, and development. On the other hand, the veil, which all women had to wear under the Taliban in Afghanistan, domesticated women and signifies the government's desire for authenticity and cultural revival.(34) The central social unit in a Muslim society is the family, in which the man has traditionally had the authority over the entire household. In this patriarchal context, marriage is seen as a transaction between households, which shows how women are viewed exclusively as reproducers and pawns in economic and political exchanges.(35) Women continue to be subject to forms of control and subordination that restricts their everyday behavior, resulting in gender segregation, and "the association of female virtue with family honor." (36) Political and social structures have clearly directly contributed to the oppression of women's rights and their inability to have their voices heard even without the restrictions that Islam has imposed.

What started as a reform for women's rights and progressive social change after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan up until 1996 led to a religiopolitical government founded on the basis of patriarchal social structure, making the lives of

women under the Taliban worse than they ever have been before.(37) Since the overthrow of the Taliban, the state has continued to advocate unity and reconciliation among the Islamic communities, but it has ignored the issues of social change and the advancement of women. Because women are undeniably a symbol of political goals and cultural identity that are directly linked to the concept of modernization and progress, gender and women's rights will eventually be an issue that the government and the rest of the world must address.(38)

### **Modernization of Women in Afghanistan – The Fight for Equality**

Even under the rule of the Taliban, women's organizations did exist underground, providing a single source for hope among the oppressed Afghani people. Their progress has remained minimal due to the circumstances that existed under the Taliban, but their simple existence was a reminder that modernization and gender rights cannot be ignored forever. The lack of women's rights in Afghanistan is directly related to the political and social structures that exist, which uses Islam as a justification for the way in which women are treated.(39) But many people, both men and women, see Islam as a unifying factor among the people who are opposed to the legitimization and cause of human rights abuses.(40) The Islamic governments have all failed to promote a concept of a nation state and a uniform national identity, resulting in many small factions and groups that continue to fight one another. Islam is one of the commonalities that exists in the diverse countries of Afghanistan, and through the modernization process, women are trying to use Islam to promote unity.(41) It is true that traditional Islamic law does not allow women to own land and it expects women to provide a dowry to her husband. These and other parts of Islamic law that place limits on women have been reformulated to give the government more power to oppress women. In other words, the government uses Islamic law to justify their oppression of women's rights resulting in the rest of the world misunderstanding that traditional Islam promotes the persecution, cruelty, and inequality of women.

One major problem with the women's movement in Afghanistan under the Taliban was that the women receiving little support from the rest of the world. There is still no common ground among feminists around the world, and many Western feminists still see feminism as a Western concept that can never exist in the rest of the world. For example, the ideas of liberation and autonomy are seen as legitimate for national governments in the West but inappropriate when applied to gender relations in Muslim countries because these traditions are seen as "cu-

lural artifacts" that should not be touched or criticized. In this sense, feminists are also using cultural relativism to ignore the injustices that are being inflicted upon women all over the world.(42) Changes in Afghanistan will also call for outside influence and support, which would require the word "feminism" to be defined as "an organized activity on behalf of all women's rights and interests."(43) For the rest of the world to realize that additional outside support is needed by Muslim women in many countries, it must realize that cultural relativism is being used by many governments to turn away from social injustices occurring in the world, justifying their actions by the preservation of tradition and culture.

Through the persistent struggles of Afghan women's organizations to have their voices heard by the rest of the world, the global feminist network has in some ways started to converge, and the needs of women in both developed and developing countries are starting to be recognized. Feminists are in agreement that the basic rights of education, income, and reproduction rights should be granted to all women, regardless of cultural context.(44) Feminist movements in Pakistan have proliferated, and are supportive of the cause of women's groups within Afghanistan, providing them with a voice they do not have under the Taliban. Several women's groups in Afghanistan, such as the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA), have started to effectively promote awareness of the Afghan situation on a global level with great risk, but the issue of women's rights is no longer going unnoticed. Any significant progress internally would require social programs in Afghanistan to be instituted with government support of equality for women, and until fundamentalist regimes accept certain notions of the universal concept of human rights, this seems unlikely.(45)

It seems that the source in Afghanistan that has the most capability to promote these types of changes is the women in organizations such as RAWA and the men who support these organizations and the ideals that these women promote because of the fact that they represent a voice that is not being heard in the Muslim human rights discourse. Women's organizations are an area of research that has surprisingly been left untouched in discussions about establishing a common discourse among the Islamic and the Western world, and it is here that I have, through interaction with women in RAWA, become passionate about going beyond the social programs and publications that these groups have enacted. The social oppression of women in Afghanistan has been a topic that has come to the center of the world's attention in recent events, and it is becoming more important than ever before to understand the history, the culture, and the religious institutions that exist in this country. Women in Afghanistan have been fighting the argument of the



Islamic fundamentalist government that Islam calls for the denial of women's rights as they continue to use Islam to legitimate their monarchical regime and oppression and persecution of women. Only in the last decade have the voices of Afghan women been heard by the rest of the world. They call for recognition of the fact that Islam is not an oppressive religion, despite the way it is being used against women in Afghanistan to cause great suffering and persecution.

Because of the growing concern for the violations of human rights in Muslim countries, the focus of the international community should be on the grass roots women's organizations that have been founded and work in Afghanistan, using Muslim principles, to obtain rights for women. From their perspective, the way can see the way in which human rights, and more specifically women's rights, when looked at through a universal framework, can be reconciled in the context of a Muslim country such as Afghanistan. The men in organizations such as RAWA are also proof that the concept of women's rights do exist in a Muslim context in Afghanistan and that women's rights are not purely a concern of women. Groups like this show how the modernization of women in countries like Afghanistan is raising the issue that women's rights must be recognized on an international level and addressed in a way that is not simply relativistic. The ways in which organizations like RAWA view human rights will provide a segue into establishing universal standards for upholding human rights in the twenty first century.

### **RAWA and the Voices of Women in Afghanistan**

The universal/cultural relativist argument is brought into a new light when Muslim women are brought into the picture because there are clearly both men and women inside the country of Afghanistan who oppose the Islamic justification of human rights abuses and who subscribe to the Western ideas of human rights and specifically women's rights.(46) Recently, due to the American War on Terrorism, many women from Afghanistan have begun to speak out in the United States about the persecution of women by the Taliban. These events have shed a new light on the Islamic religion and the violations of women's rights that have been taking place within Afghanistan. As more Muslim women begin to speak out, it is essential that the rest of the world understand the implications of their beliefs on for the argument supporting universal human rights. If people could see how women from a culturally specific group, meaning Muslim women in Afghanistan, view human rights in a universal way, many perceptions about the culture of Islam would change completely. Because they are speaking from a Muslim perspective and they are saying things contrary to popular belief of Islamic views, the effect that

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their views will have on outsiders will be effective in changing certain generalized notions about human rights and Islam. Their voices can then enlighten the universalist notion of human rights, opening doors for determining a framework for human rights discourse that has been unattainable up until this point. Women's organizations such as RAWA, founded in 1977 before the Taliban even established power in Afghanistan enable the world to see how women's rights in Afghanistan are viewed by Islamic women who have been given no voice. Women's organizations including RAWA have modernized not in the sense that they have adopted Western feminist views, but instead they have taken the initiative to assertively oppose the violation of human rights as women in a country that is a gendered patriarchy.

RAWA was established in Kabul, Afghanistan, at the time of the Soviet occupation as an independent social and political organization of Afghan women with a mission to fight for human rights and social justice within Afghanistan.(47) The founder, Mina Kishwar Kamal, was killed by Islamists on February 4, 1987, and in reaction RAWA staged a demonstration by women and children protesting Soviet control of Afghanistan. Their statement, which has continued to resonate throughout the period of the Taliban regime and today, is that the majority of Afghans stand for an independent and democratic Afghanistan where social justice and freedom to women are guaranteed. RAWA's objective continues to be to get an increased number of women involved in social and political activities aimed at acquiring human rights and working to end the struggle for women in Afghanistan by instituting democratic and secular values. They were opposed to the Soviet regime that controlled Afghanistan, and continue to oppose the Islamic fundamentalist governments that have controlled Afghanistan since 1992 when the Soviet-installed puppet government was overthrown.

RAWA is involved in activities in the socio-political arenas such as education, health, income generation, and political agitation. Amnesty International strongly supports these groups and recognizes them for the development of well-organized schools and health centers within Afghanistan.(48) The problems that RAWA faces are mainly the threats that they receive from the previous Taliban government, extremists in the newly elected government, Islamic Youth groups, and other groups that are against promoting women's rights. They publish and distribute many publications on human rights and educational cassettes for women, but it has remained difficult until recently for them to distribute their material within Afghanistan because any store that distributes their publications will be shut down by the government. RAWA has been at the forefront of the Afghan women's fight

for women's rights, and by doing so, the women involved take many risks to achieve their goal with little outside help or support.

RAWA continues to provide information through online publications and anonymous interviews to try to get their voices heard on an international level. A recent documentary by the BBC, made with the cooperation of RAWA, including shocking footage of the mass executions of women in Afghanistan and providing insight into the oppression many Afghan women suffer under the Taliban.(49) It is known that of the sixteen million estimated Afghans at the end of the 1970's, over two million have been killed in the war of resistance against Soviet occupation and then later by fundamentalist groups. Because Islamic fundamentalism looks at women as sub-humans who are only fit for household slavery, the situation in Afghanistan has changed for women under the newly elected government, but women are still viewed as inferior and are still deprived of equal rights. RAWA women continue to risk their lives on a daily basis to run schools for girls and speak out against the continued violations of women's rights against the new Afghan government.

### Muslim Afghan Women Call for Universal Human Rights

The information of both past and present human rights violations that are coming out of Afghanistan through the work of groups such as RAWA has been documented in hearings by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, legitimizing their claims. It is easy to see how the UN and many scholars can use reports such as these to make claims that Afghanistan is violating women's rights, but there is another element here that must be addressed. One must explore not only the extent human rights violations occurring in Afghanistan, but also how the women of RAWA frame their argument against the violations of these rights as Muslim women. They support the Western view of human rights, which is the ideal that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is upholding, yet they are Muslim women who live in Afghanistan. For some this may seem a contradiction in terms by coupling universal human rights and Afghan Muslim, but many of them are indeed devout followers of Islam as well. One may also argue that their purpose is gendered because the organization is mostly composed of women, but there are many Muslim males within Afghanistan that support RAWA and the ideals that they stand for.(51) Drawing together the issues of human rights, Islam, and women's rights in Afghanistan brings to light an entirely new field of research that looks at organizations such as RAWA as the primary source. These issues have been researched with some overlap by schol-

ars, such as Valentine Moghadam who deals with the modernization, feminization, and nationalization of women in predominantly Muslim countries including Afghanistan, but the role and the ideals of these organizations have not been given enough attention.

The influence of RAWA has increasingly grown, especially in the last few months, and therefore understanding the ways in which they have modernized in an Islamic context must be a large part of establishing an Islamic basis for universal human rights. To establish a clear understanding of the principles that Afghan Muslim women are speaking out against, one cannot ignore the increasing demands for modernization by Afghan women and the significant changes that are starting to occur within Afghanistan. Muslim terrorists and the war against them have created an opening for Afghan women to reach out to human rights and women's organizations around the world by so firmly confronting terrorism within Afghanistan. Now more than ever women have been given the opportunity by outside sources to address the conditions that they have been subjected to by Islamic fundamentalists for the last few decades. It is important to listen to their stories in order to understand what types of violations of human rights occur in Afghanistan, but it is even more important to understand their central belief system, which is based not only around the fact that they are Muslim, but is also shaped by gender, social class, ethnicity, and ideology. It is a common assumption that those responsible for the attacks on the America were from the Islamic world, and furthermore that Islam is oppressive of human rights. Both of these statements are untrue and in fact, Islam supports the opposite of violence and oppression. In order to establish a deeper understanding that the Islamic community cannot be generalized will require women in grass roots organizations to continue to fight for their right to be heard, and through these voices the rest of the world can gain valuable insight on how Islam really defines the concept of human rights and the validity of the human being.

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