

## The trauma of a woman's words of war

War is a silencing shroud. In Afghanistan, the Taliban banned women from writing and reciting poetry, limiting spaces for women's voices; but for Afghan women, poetry is a sword<sup>1</sup> and women have fought to fulfil their rich literary heritage. Nadia Anjuman, a poet from Herat, Afghanistan, revealed the oppression of Afghan women through her words, which are now her legacy following her murder in 2005, for supposedly bringing disgrace on her family through her poetry.<sup>2</sup>

Women as storytellers of suffering are the epitome for understanding the lived spaces of war. Yet, even academic research reinforces the silencing of a woman's words in war.<sup>3</sup> Stories become part of medical apparatus and pathologised. Lives are reduced to prevalence figures, which are then translated into reports such as the WHO's recent urgent call to address mental health needs in conflict.<sup>3</sup> Health responses focus on generating adequate data for the consequences of conflict. Yet, where are the stories of women who are suffering; why are these storytellers absent? We need brave researchers to receive such stories and share the suffering that is being endured as a way to deconstruct silencing, especially to health professionals.

Words and silence are weaponised in war, meaning that a woman's story is silenced because of what she has the power to reveal, but she is never silent; stories are living breathing vessels of the self and surrounding world. We need to create spaces for women's stories of suffering to understand the traumas of war. Storytelling is an integral part of healing.<sup>4</sup> We have developed a therapeutic intervention for trauma using storytelling to support the mental health of women who have experienced gender-based violence.

As researchers, we must see beyond the structures of silencing because no

woman is voiceless; and voices cannot be given, only listened to. Women need to tell their own stories. Then, the trauma of a woman's words of war will be found.

I thank L Ahmad for her help with studying, listening to, and honouring women suffering in war. I declare no competing interests.

**Ayesha Ahmad**  
**aahmad@sgul.ac.uk**

St George's, University of London, London  
SW17 0RE, UK

Copyright © 2019 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an Open Access article under the CC BY 4.0 license.

- 1 Doucet L. Dangerous 'truth': the Kabul women's poetry club. 2013. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-24608666> (accessed July 15, 2019).
- 2 Gall C. Afghan poet dies after beating by husband. 2005. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/08/world/asia/afghan-poet-dies-after-beating-by-husband.html> (accessed July 15, 2019).
- 3 van Ommeren, M. Mental health conditions in conflict situations are much more widespread than we thought. 2019. <https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/mental-health-conditions-in-conflict-situations-are-much-more-widespread-than-we-thought> (accessed July 15, 2019).
- 4 Mannell J, Ahmad L, Ahmad A. Narrative storytelling as mental health support for women experiencing gender-based violence in Afghanistan. *Soc Sci Med* 2018; **214**: 91–98.



Lancet Public Health 2019

Published Online

August 6, 2019

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(19\)30146-X](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(19)30146-X)

S2468-2667(19)30146-X

For more information on  
storytelling for health see  
<https://www.shaercircle.com/>