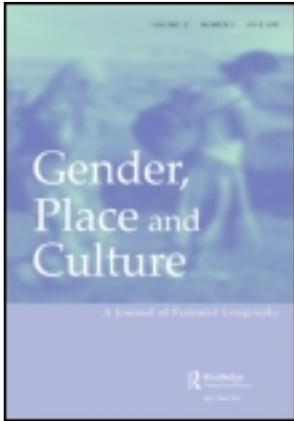


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Armored peacocks and proxy bodies: gender geopolitics in aid/development spaces of Afghanistan

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This article examines embodied geopolitics in Afghanistan by way of gender roles and relations among and between international workers and Afghan recipients of international information, aid, development and (in)security. My analysis is theoretically situated within critical feminist geographies and includes empirical data collected from qualitative surveys, interviews, focus groups and observations of Afghans and international workers in Kabul, Afghanistan (2006–2008). There is a significant and growing number of scholarly feminist critiques of and debates over the US-led international coalition's gendered approach to 'saving' Afghanistan from the Taliban. This article seeks to add to these studies by discussing these geopolitical encounters at the scale of bodily interactions. Specifically, it discusses how gendered freedom and savior fantasies illustrate spatial practices of othering through exclusion and intimacy, before turning to how these are enacted through representation, behavior, mobility and sexuality.

Keywords: feminist geopolitics; Afghanistan; gender politics; aid/development; sex work; conflict

Introduction

This article examines gender geopolitics by way of a critical analysis of the corporeal production and inhabitation of international spaces of aid/development and private sector work in Afghanistan. The diversity of international workers and their complex and often paradoxical experiences situate the corporeal as a central site from which to symbolize, modify or oppose prevailing expectations of gender geopolitics. Gendered bodies are key sites of geopolitical contestation that are put to work for political, social and economic maintenance or resistance. I begin with an overview of the gender geopolitics of Afghanistan both historically and post-7 October 2001 (the US invasion of Afghanistan). Here, the continued significance of a gender geopolitics, and its associated links with international intervention from aid/development to military invasion and resistance throughout the twentieth century, are highlighted. I follow this with an overview of research methods, before turning to a critical analysis of how modernity and tradition are conceptualized, preformed, resisted and reformulated by international workers via a gendered body politics.

These sections emphasize various conceptualizations of modernity through a critical reading of corporeality based on gender, dress and mobility. In addition, I highlight how particular behaviors are posited as modern in contrast to 'traditional' practices in

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Afghanistan, as well as how certain ‘modern’ behaviors are also identified and described by research participants as an escape from the order and law enforcement of ‘modern’ societies. These behaviors and other practices associated with work and leisure among internationals in Afghanistan include freedom and hero fantasies and rebellious acts of humanitarian or development assistance. Finally, I focus on international workers’ discussions of sexual modernity and sex acts associated with conflict, including the placement of sex workers in Afghanistan’s international scene. Sex worker bodies provide an expected ‘service’, insofar as they are viewed as a corporeal proxy for the release of male sexual aggression that simultaneously ‘protects’ legitimate female labor/bodies.

Development wars – Afghanistan

Afghanistan has long been a key site and target for economic, political or territorial expansion from larger and often more powerful states. Rubin (2002) defines (mid-twentieth century) Afghanistan as a rentier state due to its reliance on foreign revenues and lack of a thriving locally generated economic structure. Soviet Union and US competition during the cold war, for example, included significant aid/development projects in Afghanistan. This resulted in several sociopolitical and economic projects that attempted to ‘modernize’ women as symbolic representations of ‘progress’, which remained geographically limited to the capital city’s urban educated elite (Edwards 2002; Zulfacar 2006). Indeed, the ‘rights’ and visibility of women are a unifying theme throughout various phases of modernization in the twentieth century despite disparate strategies, leadership and international influences (Suhrike 2007).

The nationalization of women as a measurable sociopolitical category continues to shape gender politics in Afghanistan. The onset of contemporary political conflicts in Afghanistan began with the 1978 People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan’s (PDPA) takeover of the central government by way of a violent coup and formation of a communist state (Goodhand 2002; Rubin 2002). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was precipitated by infighting among the Afghan leadership in Kabul and local uprisings in the provinces. As the Soviet–US cold war raged hot in Afghanistan (1979–1989), aid and development became more overtly politicized. The Soviet Union’s geopolitical interest in centralizing authority in Afghanistan included ‘liberating’ and nationalizing Afghan women. Conversely, the US with Pakistan (and Saudi Arabia) provided support to the Mujahidin¹ resistance in defense of their homeland and women (Moghadam 1999). Aid provided by the US and Pakistan was also used as a method for gaining local support for various resistance factions (Barfield 2004).

The Soviet military withdrawal occurred in 1989, while the USSR continued to support the Afghan government under the leadership of Najibullah and the US continued to finance various Mujahidin factions. After the fall of the Soviet Union (1991) and subsequent fall of the Najibullah government (1992) aid functioned largely outside direct geopolitical control and major sources of aid were discontinued. The fractional Mujahidin groups, each vying for power and control of Kabul, fought a bloody civil war (1992–1996), which destroyed much of the capital city. During the civil war, aid existed outside of direct state control. However, competition grew among aid organizations without accountability or oversight (Goodhand 2002).

The growth of the Taliban movement in southern Afghanistan (1994), and the eventual takeover of the central government in Kabul (1996), ushered in a new era of politicized aid, intended as a tool to alter Taliban behaviors, which included placing restrictions upon women’s mobility and working outside the home. As Goodhand (2002) and Barakat and

Wardell (2002) argue (in *Third World Quarterly's* special issue on Afghanistan), these attempts largely failed, resulting in more entrenched Taliban controls on civil monitoring.² More recent analysis by Suhrke (2007) argues that contemporary international influences in Afghanistan remain subject to these historic liabilities (also see Rashid 2008 and Rubin 2006 for additional discussion).

Transnational feminist organizations attempted to increase awareness about the Taliban and sought to de-legitimize their control over Afghanistan. This movement included several 'famous feminists' such as Eve Ensler, Jane Fonda and Oprah Winfrey. Feminist organizations such as the Feminist Majority Foundation also labeled the Taliban's removal of women from public space as 'gender apartheid' (also see Rashid 2001; Russo 2006). Transnational feminist efforts in the US largely focused on the enforcement of the *burqa*, women's lack of mobility and the inability of women to receive necessary healthcare or receive an education (Hirshkind and Mahmood 2002; Fluri 2008).

The post-9/11 international interventions in Afghanistan focused on women (not gender) and their public and political participation; and yet these did not address, or did not understand, the complexities of Afghan gender roles and relations (see Abirafeh 2009). For example, the family and household remain a centrally important space for Afghan social life. The domestic spaces of family life provide several spatially and socially distinct challenges and opportunities for women, which vary considerably by ethnic group, location, religious belief and education level (and also vary household to household when the former list of social indices are similar). Similarly, Smith's (2009) analysis of household decision-making highlights the complexities and negotiations for arranging marriages that engage both genders in the process of decision-making.

The household represents a space of security for and control over women (Barakat and Wardell 2002) and generally a woman's position within her family is coveted by her *namus* (face/honor). This honor functions through her role as a wife and mother, which is often paramount to other contributions to the family such as paid labor (also see Tapper 1991, Kandiyoti 2007). Yet ethnicity, education level, family status and a network of kinship relationships at home and in the community complicate women's gender identity, position and authority. Women's power and decision-making also vary considerably over the life cycle. For example, older women who have built up social and kinship networks over time gain more authority and influence than they had as younger women (Kakar 2002, Kandiyoti 1988). As Kandiyoti (2007) argues, reducing the treatment of women and their lack of rights in Afghanistan to a form of cultural and institutionalized patriarchy also masks the entrenched and caustic effects of insecurity and poverty.³

The geopolitical framings of Afghan women as the targeted subjects of gender-focused development and modernization efforts regularly occur without a clear or consistent understanding of the contextual aspects of gender relations outlined above. These concerns have promoted policy-based initiatives to improve Afghan women's participation in and access to development projects and information (for examples see Andersen 2005; AREU 2005; USAID 2007). Formal and informal Afghan women's organizations formed after the fall of the Taliban; however, as Azarbaijani-Moghaddam (2009, 67) argues, these organizations remain 'reliant on goodwill and funding from the international community and are largely trapped between donor dictates and pressure to conform to cultural stereotypes'.

Crucially, the corporeal has represented, and continues to represent, a key site onto which, and through which, conceptualizations of 'modernity' and 'tradition' are enacted in contemporary Afghanistan. This article discusses various aspects of a gendered corporeality along a modern/tradition continuum (rather than as a strict binary) as

articulated and performed by international workers. Drawing on the work of feminist geographers, I am particularly interested in exploring the ways in which the body represents a contested site and how it is put to work for geopolitical manipulation as part of the global ‘war on terror’. Bearing in mind the lineage noted above, 11 September 2001 became another key moment in the geopolitical scripting of Afghan women’s bodies as gendered sites of religious extremism and for symbolically positioning modern ‘civilization’ as progress (Fluri 2009a).

Feminist scholars provide important critiques of the myriad ways in which the Bush administration’s ‘saving women’ trope co-opted women’s rights discourses by linking US militarism in Afghanistan and ‘western’ modernity as essential for Afghan women’s liberation and ‘freedom’ (Abu-Lughod 2002; Chew 2008; Hunt 2002). Many international development technologies link the ‘modern’ to ‘universal’ definitions and declarations of human rights as both an outreach of globalization and necessary for the emancipation of women (see critiques by Kaiwar and Muzumdar 2003 and Sparke 2007a, 2007b). Representations and conceptualizations of modernity are also connected to behavioral performances of supposedly ‘modern’ gender roles and norms. These aspects of modernity will be discussed in the subsequent sections of this article as corporeal, behavioral and sexual modernity.

Defining modernity is indeed challenging, as claims and representation fall within various categories. Thus, for the purposes of this analysis, I examine international workers’ representations and performances of modernity based on their own understandings of the concept. This does not imply that the examples presented in this article represent the totality of modernity or modern expression, rather that they are aspects of modernity as defined or discussed by the research participants. For example, research participants often identified ‘modernity’ in opposition to or in direct contrast with the ‘traditional’ societies in Afghanistan. I turn next, however, to a brief overview of my research methods.

Research and data collection methods

The data for this article was collected on three separate field site visits to Kabul, Afghanistan (summer 2006, winter 2007 and summer 2008). I conducted surveys, interviews and focus groups, and carried out observations of international workers in the humanitarian aid and development sectors and private contractor, logistics and security sectors (of the 150 international workers observed, 55% were female). Participants were asked a variety of questions related to their work and personal life in Afghanistan. Questions included identifying recreation activities and types of relationships with international workers and Afghans. I also conducted surveys and interviews with 30 Afghan men and 25 women living in Kabul city with the help of local research assistants,⁴ and participant observation with Afghan families. Participants’⁵ names are not included or are represented using pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality.

International workers continually highlighted their national diversity (workers from over 40 countries in various sectors) and their type of work (aid, development, private contractors, logistics or security); reasons for being in the country; level of integration with Afghans; and length of time in Afghanistan (ranging from one month to six years). International respondents highlighted the ‘intention’ of their work as an important method for further identifying and categorizing individuals. Afghan respondents described international workers broadly as foreigners and in some cases by country, but rarely by type of work or intentionality.

Most of the aid/development workers included in this study had prior experience in other conflict zones such as Rwanda, Croatia, Bosnia, Somalia and the Sudan. Many of the workers lamented the problems associated with development ideologies and applications without consideration of local knowledge, needs, culture or gender relations. Others discussed the importance of writing reports that reflected the geopolitical image of their respective home countries or organizations. For example, respondents from the US discussed the importance of meeting the objectives of the Bush administration in their reports if not in reality. Their lack of knowledge or understanding of social nuances was also identified as a primary conundrum.

Corporeal modernity

I use the term corporeal modernity to identify the use of the body as a gendered public space and site of socio-political representation. Corporeal modernity also provides a place for illustrating or expressing secularized 'western' ideals of liberation and freedom (Fluri 2009a; Secor 2001, 2005). For example, the *burqa*⁶ came to symbolize the Taliban's oppressive treatment of women and was discursively positioned as the antithesis of US female corporeality. Clothing considered acceptable dress in Afghanistan, as highlighted by several participants in this study (both international and Afghan), became a symbol of on-the-ground acceptance or rejection of 'US-modernity'.

Afghan dress for women provides spatial privacy to the body; it visually identifies the covered body as a private space that is not for public view (by men outside one's kinship group). Both international workers and Afghan women wore clothing that primarily covered the body, while covering the head/hair remained a much more politically charged and contentious issue. For example, several female international (aid/development) workers⁷ were adamant about not wearing a headscarf⁸ in order to preserve their personal identity, autonomy and in many cases to 'model' alternative forms of dress. Thus:

I don't wear a headscarf to set an example for the women here. ((Female development officer, 45, 2006)

I am a radical feminist and I am not going to dress the way anyone tells me to. I don't care what the men think. (Female private sector worker, 38, 2006)

I do not wear a headscarf because it will be harder for the women here to take theirs off if I agree to wear one. (Female aid worker, 29, 2007)

The 'choice' not to wear a headscarf in Afghanistan was labeled several times as necessary for 'setting an example', which, as Yegenoglu (2002, 86) argues, idealizes the western-feminine position as normative.

Conversely, some international women identified Afghan clothing and the headscarf as a necessary form of dress in order to avoid stares or verbal harassment in public space. These research participants expressed their dismay at the focus on 'the headscarf' as a so-called 'important' issue, noting:

There are two excuses for not covering. One, 'I don't want to fuss with it [headscarf], and two I must teach Afghans that not all people wear scarves.' *Like Afghans don't know that*. Why is this seen as an important step toward modernity while there is so much need for education and a crumbling infrastructure here? (Female aid worker, 42, 2006)

And:

Why is it [not wearing a headscarf] a form of modernity versus education? During the Taliban Afghan women were less concerned with the *burqa*... Are they [Afghan women] nothing but victims unless we help them? Afghan women were offended by the hoopla over the *burqa*.

I place an emphasis on gender not women! The life expectancy of men is $42\frac{1}{2}$. It is about the same for women. It is rare to find post-menopausal women here and one in eight pregnant women will die. – Who has rights here? Women? Men? *No one has rights here!* (Female health worker, 55, 2008)

Dress was dismissed by several internationals as unimportant in comparison with more pressing issues such as health care, security and education. The above statements also underscore the politicization of healthcare through women's bodies and human rights claims, a point which has been taken up by other scholars (see Petchesky and Laurie 2007).

International participants regularly discussed the problems with 'western' ideologies and conceptions of modernity because they were tied up in 'how to dress', which distracted from other forms of 'need'. Conversely, Afghan participants⁹ highlighted the importance of wearing Afghan clothes and *hejab* and identified this as necessary and important to convey respect for Afghan culture and religious beliefs. Interestingly, women's bodies acted as prime sites of contestation for both international conceptualizations of modernity and Afghan concerns about unwanted international influences, cultural preservation and religious integrity.

Gendered corporeal expectations were not solely focused on women. Western men were largely more reluctant to wear Afghan clothes, although many who 'worked in the field' in the provinces outside the capital city chose Afghan dress as a form of camouflage. For example, international men identified the use of Afghan clothes and growing a beard as part their security when working in provincial areas without formal military or private security personnel. What is more, former National Public Radio (NPR) correspondent Sarah Chayes provides an example of cross-dressing for mobility and efficiency. She discusses her decision to wear Afghan men's clothing because they provided a less resistant path to 'get the job done'. Her clothes created an 'optical illusion' that at first glance would legitimately position her in public spaces as an Afghan man, rather than out of place as either a woman or westerner (see Chayes 2006, 31).

Similarly, Afghan men discussed the 'need' to wear western clothes when traversing international spaces in Kabul (such as offices, restaurants and other buildings that cater to international workers). For example, Afghan men identified the importance of wearing 'western' clothes in order to improve their job opportunities or for upward mobility within the international job sector. Afghan men also increased their ability to access international spaces (that barred entry to Afghans) when wearing 'western' clothes. This was evident both in discussion with, and observations of, Afghan men; when wearing western clothes they were able to access 'exclusive' international spaces, while they were barred entry (to the same establishment) when wearing Afghan clothes (and without an international escort).

Several international Afghan women returning to the country as part of international government or non-government organizations (NGOs) also expressed feeling caught between two competing expectations of their dress and behavior. Many international Afghan women discussed the importance of not appearing 'too Muslim' in an international space or 'too modern' in an Afghan space. These women highlighted the importance of understanding gender relations within Afghanistan rather than imposing a hegemonic feminist framework. The following quote encapsulates some of these discussions:

You can't avoid generalizations because we are bound by language so I will generalize with the disclaimer that it is a generalization... Gender has such a strong impact on Islamic culture, and if you don't know the gender rules you really screw yourself [referring to the internationals]. Some women here do things and then say they didn't know 'the rules' but you must know and know the consequences for yourself and Afghan women. Afghan women have

more ability to resist or change things and no one seems to understand that. It is not my place as an expat Afghan to decide for them or tell them not to wear a veil. It is up to them. (Female freelance worker, 26, 2006)

According to this respondent, Afghan women have more room for negotiation and resistance within their own spatial and cultural contexts than within ideologies brought in from an outside power. As Mahmood (2005, 23) argues, it is important to see norms not as binaries, but in the context of how they are 'lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated'. Private spaces and homes as central locations of family decision-making in Afghanistan encapsulate complex systems of gender roles and relations. Classic patriarchy, as discussed by Kandiyoti (1988), intricately weaves honor into the fabric of kinship relations and tribal alliances. Women's bodies and behaviors mark the boundaries of family honor. Thus, male bodies (who are not *mahram*¹⁰) by definition pose a potential threat to Afghan women's bodies and family honor. Physical or sexual threat to the female body correspondingly threatens Afghan masculinity (Edwards 2002).

The separation of women from men (outside their kinship group) has been (and in many cases continues to be) a method for preventing the violation of a woman's body (either by force or choice) and subsequently preventing the violation of family honor. This is accomplished by limiting women's access to and mobility within public spaces. When women enter public space they wear loose fitting clothing and headscarf (*hejab*) and also for some the *chadori/burqa* as a corporeal signifier of 'security' because it identifies a woman as 'off limits' to men in public space. Dress in this case acts as a mobile private space and identifies a woman as protected by her kinship group. In some cases women are expected to travel with a *mahram* as an additional layer of protection to her bodily privacy and integrity. Male bodies, although more accepted in public, are also covered with loose fitting clothing. The public exhibition of the body is, therefore, only appropriate in public-private homo-social places such as a *hamam* (public bath), while public swimming pools in Kabul remain open only to men and boys. Several Afghan women also identified the *hamam* as an important site for women's public-private congregation outside their homes.

Male and female co-mingling in a recreational swimming pool counters existing gendered expectations of private-body exposure in public space. In response to this, international places such as restaurants with swimming pools post a 'foreign passport only'¹¹ sign in order to restrict Afghans from entering, maintaining an exclusionary boundary between this private-public international place and Afghan conceptualizations of gendered public corporeality (Fluri 2009b).

Combat dress was also identified as both in and out of place in certain international settings in Kabul. Non-security and non-military personnel invoked laughter when describing the use of combat dress in 'safe' places. For example, men (and some women) wearing body armor and carrying weapons within security zones (i.e. compound structures) were mocked by individuals who also traversed these same spaces without armor or weapons. The following excerpts from a focus group illustrates how gender and the relative security of Kabul and combat masculinity are intertwined as part of public representations of violence and heroism through gendered bodily performances (also see Butler 1999):

I think it [male behavior in international spaces] is more of a hero thing than the macho thing; but then again there are fights over women. They are all competing by hitting on the ladies and touching them [in an international restaurant] and then they all want to act like Rambo and hit each other with guns. (Male contractor, 34, 2006)

But here [in Kabul] they are still safe. The Taliban and Al Qaeda are very close, but not here. If they really want action they should go to Iraq. These guys don't behave like that in places like Kandahar. (Male contractor, 30, 2006)

They look like armored peacocks, when they are strutting around. [laughing] Really that is exactly what it looks like to me, when they wear their body armor in Kabul compound or an international grocery store¹² . . . They like to sit around at the bar and tell stories. It is just crazy, because then they knock on your door at night and ask you to sleep with them because they just want you to hold them [laughter]. (Female aid worker, 32, 2006)

This discussion, similar to others, focuses on the behaviors and performances of heroism and combat masculinity as a continual part of ‘international life’ in Kabul. The male body represents an oppositional figure and site for aggressive violence (or potential violence) and the female body as the object of male desire and competition. Conversely, many women invoked humor and highlighted the safety of certain spaces in order to discredit and resist participating in these corporeal representations of security (i.e. flak jackets). For example, discussion of male loneliness or desire for (non-sexual) touch were perceived as either disingenuous or a humorous conundrum relative to the predominant performances of combat masculinity.

Male behaviors and masculine performances vary, yet are often categorized in relation to women and corporeal representations of violence, (in)security, loneliness or desire. For example, most respondents discussed their loneliness and desires for companionship (including intimate partnerships) due in part to their separation from a spouse/family. For example, most international aid/development organizations do not allow international workers to bring their spouse/partner or children due to security concerns. Other respondents identified behaviors such as the consumption of alcohol and prostitution as ‘acceptable’ because their international bodies are not held accountable for these behaviors. Respondents discussed the inability of the Afghan government to enforce local laws on internationals, which included the ability of internationals to bribe local officers or government officials to reach their desired legal outcome.

Respondents also categorized behaviors by work and gender. For example, most international respondents (both male and female) associated aggressive, violent or sexually explicit behavior with male private security personnel, contractors and adventure seekers. The following quotes represent the tenor of these discussions:

International men give a bad example to Afghan men in their attitudes and treatment of women (sexist in the offices and the use of brothels). International women tend to be confidantes and supporters of Afghan women and open their horizons. The for-profit-men and contractors are very bad and they are not controlled by ethics and standards like the *International* NGOs. (Female development worker, mid-30s, 2006)

And:

Men from the Scandinavian countries, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, countries that have the best human right records, but here they harass women. More international women are raped here than any other site. During the bombings many women were raped in the bunkers. International women are more afraid of international men than Afghan men. (Female health worker, mid-50s, 2008)

Tensions between human rights behavioral expectations associated with ‘western’ locations such as Scandinavia (and other places in Europe or North America) and the behaviors of individuals from those countries illustrates the dislocated embodiments of power and violence wrapped into the folds of discursive human rights superiority, morality and ethics. Many respondents highlighted these problems while also stating that private sector workers (i.e. contractors, logistics personnel and private security, who are often hired by aid and development organizations) are ‘beyond the controls’ of standards and ethics, which are assumed to exist in non-profit and humanitarian organizations.¹³ Aid workers and peacekeepers can *also* sexually exploit and abuse vulnerable populations,

such that an increase in prostitution and sex trafficking are often ‘expected’ and ‘predictable’ by-products of international assistance (see Kent 2007; Mackin 2004; Vandenberg 2005).

The assumption that international women ‘open the horizons’ for Afghan women (as stated in the above quote and reiterated by several respondents) also underscores the role of the international ‘expert’ in what Kothari (2005) discusses as the professionalization of international development. The manner in which international women are positioned to impart the path of liberation or model behaviors in order to counter Afghan patriarchy and gender roles continuously highlights Afghan women as victims and, as Yenenoglu (1998, 112) argues, ‘territorializes’ women’s bodies by subsuming them into a larger project of imperial territorialization. The implementation of imperial or hegemonic feminism fashioned onto the bodies of Afghan (and other Muslim) women help to frame racist and essentialist notions of the Muslim male body as ‘other’ and in opposition to western society (also see Chew 2008; Razack 2008).

Corporeal signifiers, then, act as significant sites for the manipulation of identity politics. Behaviors and bodily ‘freedoms’ expressed by internationals in private-public spaces (i.e. international restaurants) exemplify another layer of contested and contradictory gendered modernities. The following section examines these behaviors in conjunction with international conceptions of modernity and the spatializing of certain behaviors as both situated in Afghanistan and dislocated from this space.

Gender, behavioral ‘modernity’ and its complications

Corporeal modernity positions the body as a representational space of geopolitical discourse. Behavioral modernity moves from the body as *site* to the body as *situation* through performative acts associated with modernity or as a counter to the gendered controls over the body – linked to tradition, culture, religion or family. In the context of Afghanistan, performances associated with wearing tight-fitting or skin-revealing clothing, the use of alcohol, homosexuality, sex outside of marriage and multiple sex partners (and in some cases the use of brothels) are generally associated (among internationals) as modern counters to the ‘restrictive’ corporeal measures within Afghan traditions and social/cultural norms.

Conversely, many of these behaviors were identified as possible because they were occurring in a space of chaos and disorder, which international research participants identified as ‘freedom from’ the order of modern societies. For example, the majority of international participants identified both the local-ness and located-ness of their participation in so-called ‘modern’ behaviors. These participants acknowledged certain actions as integral to their ‘time in Afghanistan’ and an expected part of work in a conflict zone. Conflict zones were also identified as spaces that contain illicit behaviors separate from or in opposition to the way one would act ‘at home’. Internationals cited their continual mobility to explain a causal relationship between their temporally limited placement in Afghanistan and excessive corporeal consumption of alcohol, drugs and sex (both through capital exchange and the use of extramarital and multiple sex partners).

‘What happens in Kabul stays in Kabul’¹⁴ was often used to explain the international ‘party scene’ in Afghanistan. This phrase symbolizes the spatial fixity of behaviors to Kabul and the corresponding ability to ‘escape’ repercussion through international mobility. Behaviors that were identified as ‘acceptable’ but counter to local Afghan gendered expectations of male–female relations were associated with modernity. International workers engaging in questionable, illegal or ‘unacceptable’ behaviors linked these behaviors to their time in Afghanistan and the lack of ‘modern order’ in conflict zones.

International workers also dismissed Afghan forms of discipline by associating them with ‘tradition’, pointing to the lack of ‘modern order’ and lawlessness in society. Behaviors such as unrestrained uses of alcohol, drugs, sex and (in some cases) brothels were identified as a ‘freedom’ or expressions of modernity in comparison with Afghan tradition; at the same time, they were paradoxically defined as ‘allowable’ or ‘accepted’ due to the lack of ‘modern’ codes of conduct or the lawlessness associated with this conflict zone. I argue that international worker experiences of these corporeal and behavioral ‘freedoms’ are both gendered and conditionally reinforced through their international status, mobility and privileged displacement. Some examples of these ‘freedoms’ also manifest in hero and adventure fantasies, as I discuss below.

Gendering geopolitical fantasy: freedom, heroism and adventure

Hero fantasies represent another gendered aspect of international aid/development/private sector workers. Social ‘freedoms’ enjoyed by international workers are afforded by way of their international mobility, extra-legal status and high salaries.¹⁵

Several male respondents discussed the ‘freedoms’ they experienced in Afghanistan as an escape from the order and rules of ‘modern law-abiding’ nations. Women’s bodies also provided a site from which to exercise sexualized modernity in conjunction with these ‘new freedoms’. Several (male) respondents living in Kabul identified their ‘new’ found freedoms as part of the prevailing disorder. These freedom fantasies were discussed in a variety of ways, and the following quote exemplifies the tenor of these discussions:

I am afraid to leave Afghanistan because I’ll lose my freedom. What freedom is that? In Afghanistan I can do whatever I want. I can carry an illegal unregistered gun, I can drive on the opposite side of the road, smoke wherever I want. I get plenty of girlfriends, that’s not the problem. But everyone leaves here after a short time. I know everything that is happening here. I ask the little boys . . . and they all tell me what is happening. I had an apartment for a few weeks but the police kept telling me I wasn’t safe. But I wouldn’t back down. You can’t back down or they’ll beat you up . . . A few weeks later I relocated. I have a gun, bulletproof vest, all I need. But if it came down to it I would throw a gun at someone not shoot him. Have I ever been harassed? No. But during the riots some guys came up to me yelling and screaming and I showed them my gun and they backed away. (Male private sector worker, 45, 2006)

‘Freedoms’ as perceived by international male workers included living in a relatively ‘safe’ conflict zone devoid of ‘modern rules of law’. Several men identified their freedom of movement as a central part of their adventure or rebellion to ‘status-quo development’. Acts of rebellious heroism included operating outside ‘typical’ aid/development paradigms by risking one’s own security in order to reconstruct a school, health center, well or bridge. This included raising funds (outside of Afghanistan), developing relationships with local elders or tribal leaders and traveling alone into ‘unsecured’ areas (i.e. without private security personnel). This ensured a direct path between donor and recipients. This representation of masculinity connected corporeal risk to heroism for reconstruction and was accompanied by a visual mark on the landscape (i.e. building, well or bridge).

Some international women also found masculine or macho behaviors necessary for achieving their own ‘feminist’ goals in Afghanistan. Macho feminists ‘acted’ like men in order to secure their position as one of the boys or an Afghan male peer rather than ‘just another woman’. Macho feminists described their participation in these gendered performances in order to strategically increase their autonomy, mobility and to work more efficiently. For example, several women self-identified as radical feminists, while simultaneously identifying their lack of connection to Afghan women and the importance of working with men, which included identifying themselves and their actions and

attitudes as representing a third gender or being genderless in order to work closely with men and be taken seriously. This was generally identified by women as necessary in order to 'not play by the gender rules' and subsequently receive equal (or nearly equal) treatment from men (both Afghan and international) rather than being treated 'like a woman'.

I identify these women as macho-feminists because they self-identified as feminists (and in some cases as radical feminists) while incorporating macho and masculine forms of behaviors and gendered performances as a central part of their work life in Afghanistan. Macho-feminists secure their acceptance in homo-social male spaces without a significant loss of access to Afghan women (or female spaces) based on their biological inability to penetrate the heterosexual boundaries of Afghan gender relations. Also, international women are able to work, converse and interact with Afghan (and international) men in ways that are considered inappropriate for most Afghan women. For example, it would be considered inappropriate for many Afghan women to spend time alone with international or Afghan men (who are not part of their family).

In contrast to these behaviors, several female participants also discussed intimate relationships between themselves and Afghan men. These relationships did not directly disrupt the Afghan gender order or patriarchal family structure. International women participating in sexual relationships with Afghan men consider these relationships as somewhat long term, providing them with intimacy, sex, comfort and an increased sense of security. International women have more power, authority and autonomy in their relationships with Afghan men, who are (in most cases) a member of their staff (i.e. as drivers or security guards¹⁶). In these cases there are competing perspectives and ideologies of power or dominance between gender, socioeconomics and geopolitical aid/development status. Afghan men retain a dominant gender-based position within the patriarchal social structure in Afghanistan, while international women maintain a greater amount of mobility and socioeconomic opportunities than the Afghan men they enter into intimate partnerships with, particularly if he is an employee.

In other cases, international women were perceived (by some internationals and many Afghans) as problematic to Afghan family life and culture through their involvement in social engineering projects. This was articulated by several respondents who were concerned with the overall approach to gender-based development, gender mainstreaming and the focus on women (rather than an understanding of gender) among their fellow aid/development workers (also see Abirafeh 2009, Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2009). Respondents also discussed the problems associated with female international worker behavior. The following quote provides a representative example of several discussions about 'problematic' behaviors.

The liberated women here [internationals] wear whatever they want, drink, smoke, sleep with whomever. Internationals then say they are concerned about harassment from Afghan men, but within the cultural context the way they act and dress, what is 'seen' as sexual harassment is actually acceptable behavior within the Afghan cultural context. This also negatively affects Afghan women, because their families hear about the loose women and morals in the office and then they fear their daughter or wife will be harassed and don't allow them to work in that office. Also, so many [international] women here have been sexually assaulted and raped, but not by Afghans that all happens within the international community. (Female aid worker, 52, 2006)

Interestingly, in these examples and others that emerged from this research, women's bodies continually signified a key site of contestation. Women who act outside of Afghan behavioral expectations (either thorough western feminine dress or behaviors such as the use of alcohol or extramarital sex with either Afghan and international men) were regularly cited by both Afghan and international respondents as responsible for the

growing backlash against Afghan women's mobility, presence in public space and their ability to work in international spaces.

Sexual modernity and conflict sex

Sexual behaviors, such as extramarital sex, multiple sex partners or the use of brothels, illustrate a significant counter to Afghan sexual behavioral expectations, which are restricted to heterosexuality within marriage. There are, of course, examples of Afghan men (and women) who do not adhere to these expectations. However, sexual transgressions remain predominantly clandestine. Extramarital sex among internationals was therefore identified (by both international workers and local Afghans) as counter to Afghan culture, family traditions and gender norms, and subsequently associated with modern corporeal 'freedoms'. Most international respondents also cited extramarital sex (and brothels) as part of the international 'scene' in Kabul, to alleviate profound loneliness or as a release from the difficulties of work and the security restrictions required by many international organizations operating in Afghanistan.

Respondents described sex work as a ubiquitous feature of the international scene, while dislocating it from international human rights discourses or modernity and simultaneously situating it as part of 'expected' combat-male desire (also see Enloe 1989). Sex work was also identified by some as a form of sexual protection for both Afghan and international women because the sex workers were 'brought in' from China.

When someone asks to go to a Chinese restaurant for dinner, the joke is 'you mean they actually sell food there?' Because you know they are all brothels. They bring in the women from China through the sex trade, because Afghan women are off-limits. I mean there are Afghan prostitutes of course but they don't provide services to internationals because that would be suicide for both of them. (Male contractor, 32, 2006)

Afghan female bodies were identified as 'off-limits' to international men both in keeping with the gendered geopolitics of the US-led coalition and out of concern that Afghan men would retaliate. For example, several respondents highlighted an incident that involved an international male worker who was shot to death – allegedly by the brother of the Afghan woman he was dating. This story was repeated often (by various international respondents) as a cautionary tale for men to avoid intimate relationships with Afghan women (including sex workers).

Chinese sex workers, therefore, provided a proxy corporeal space for international sexual desires that did not disrupt the discursive geopolitical placement of Afghan women¹⁷ as 'saved and protected' by the US-led coalition, or the simultaneous protection/control of Afghan kinship groups. Chinese female bodies and the Chinese restaurant-cum-brothel supply proxy sexual spaces, thus highlighting a spatial (re)placement of patriarchal control over sexuality through economic exchange. The international (male) body's penetration of the Chinese sex worker's body does not disrupt the local or international geopolitical placements of Afghan women's savior/protection.

Chinese sex workers also work on temporally limited (two- to three-month) 'contracts'. The mobility of Chinese sex workers ensures the continual capital exchange value of the sex worker's body. The brothel owners do not want international men to become 'attached' to a particular woman or attempt to assume the role of 'savior'. This was identified by several respondents as a primary reason why Chinese sex workers operate on two- to three-month cyclical 'contracts'. Sex workers are cycled through the brothels to prevent their salvation and the disruption of their bodies as a site of continual capital exchange. The prostituted body's capital value remains continual by way of trafficked mobility (also see Wright 2006).

The Chinese sex worker's body provides 'foreign' exoticism for the clientele, which complicates the conceptualization of the international woman in this conflict zone. Thus, international women were largely identified as aid or development workers, while Chinese sex workers (also international) were described as providing an exotic foreign service to predominantly white western male clientele. Both Chinese sex workers and female aid/development workers are international bodies that perform geopolitical work, albeit with different corporeal performances and behavioral expectations. Both the Chinese sex workers and female aid/development workers *put their bodies to work* in this conflict zone, feeding into military, neoliberal and geopolitical (re)imaginings of international 'modern' female corporeality and various economic placements and representations in public space.

The sex worker embodies a form of security both for the international man who secures his act of penetration through capital exchange as well as for international women, as exemplified in the following:

Okay it is better for this place [Chinese brothel] to be here than to have my girlfriend get raped by some guy who is loaded [after a fight] and has to do something with his stuff. In there [the brothel] he can pay \$50 and get rid of it and I rather prefer that, let it exist as long as it is on a normal basis. And from what I have seen it does not appear that they [Chinese sex workers] are really forced to do it, because the government tried to shut down a couple of the brothels because they didn't pay the [bribe] money. And they were showing it on the TV and showing the girls at the airport and on the airplane . . . waving . . . you had these 15 Chinese girls all waving, like we will be back. (Male contractor, 30, 2007)

In this scenario the sex worker's body provides the site of 'release' for violent sexual aggression and simultaneously acts as a potential corporeal layer of protection for female aid/development workers, who are vulnerable to sexual aggression and abuse. Intimate heterosexual relationships among international workers are further mitigated by the threat of harassment or violence. The Chinese sex worker functions as both a central and marginalized site of sexual desire, violence and pleasure insofar as the use of her body by men operating in this conflict zone paradoxically (dis)places her illegitimate/illegal body-work as spatially separate from female aid/development worker's legitimized/legal body-work. The sex worker body, when identified as a sexually protective boundary between combat masculinity and aid/development worker femininity, helps to further legitimize the use of sex workers by men in this combat zone.

Summary and conclusion

The corporeal represents a site politically laden with signifiers for orchestrating and manipulating identity politics. This study highlights the gendered corporeal as a geographic space that is a symbolic, material and at times violent agent of geopolitics. Gendered identity politics paradoxically positions gender roles as both essentialized and malleable, based on desired social or political outcomes. Dominant heterosexuality and hyper-masculinity during conflict (Mayer 2000), as illustrated in this article, can be associated with both conflict and corporeal risk. Corporeal modernity exemplifies a key site for gendered body politics through dress, mobility and immobility and the corresponding tensions and competing symbols along the politically fraught continuum between fluid and ever-changing definitions of tradition and modernity. Gender and dress act as social signifiers that are contextualized and subsumed by gendered constructions of identity. Behaviors and bodily 'freedoms' expressed by internationals in private-public spaces layer the complicated, contested and contradictory performances and experiences of gendered geopolitics.

There are territorial and corporeal tensions between 'universal' discourses of human rights and 'western' embodiments of sexual harassment and violence. These tensions

illustrate the fissures and fractures of these 'universal' paradigms that at one geopolitical scale attempt to project moral superiority while at the scale of human interaction often counter these assumed moralities. Simultaneously, Afghanistan's disorder and 'lack of modernity' are continually employed (by internationals) to explain away behaviors that counter or directly oppose Afghan gendered behavioral expectations and/or national and international laws.

The employment of Chinese sex workers, for example, runs counter to 'universal' human rights discourses and provides a protective sexual proxy for other women's bodies. The Chinese sex worker's body as a site of capital exchange is also positioned (in some cases) as an intermediary for male sexual aggression that subsequently 'protects' local Afghan women and female international aid/development workers from this 'expected' hostility. The sex worker embodies the spatially fixed and temporally limited experiences of conflict zone sexualities intersected with combat, security and adventure-seeking masculinities. Chinese sex worker bodies' are imagined as the 'safe' proxy for aggressive sexual intercourse by international men, which attempt to ensure geopolitical savior/protection myths. However, the bodies of both Chinese sex workers and female aid/development workers as internationally gendered subjects conduct gender geopolitical work as part of conflict zone labor. Additionally, international female aid/development workers also seek out personal and intimate sexual relationships with Afghan men which include uneven power relationships that on the one hand disrupt the male/female power differential, while reconfirming Afghan male ability to participate in extramarital affairs without disrupting his patriarchal obligations. This also suggests other forms of bodily exchanges such as in the case of an Afghan man increasing his wages or economic status through an intimate or sexual relationship with an international female employer.

The diverse experiences of aid/development in this study situate the corporeal as a space from which to represent, refashion or resist gendered expectations of the body in public space. The embodied and gendered geopolitics of modernity, including resistance to the 'modern', refashioning of modernity and tradition or escaping the 'modern', situate the corporeal in the theater of conflict zones and identity politics. The international 'scene' in Kabul highlights the parallel structures of bodies that represent spaces of exclusion and inclusion through intimate labor and sexualized connections within the international worker 'community' and the disjuncture and proxy bodies that make up a significant aspect of intimate gendered geopolitics in conflict zones. International bodies in Afghanistan geopolitically engage in actively developing sites and spatialized imaginaries that they define as progressive while simultaneously (re)defining 'freedom' through privileged engagements that remain outside the modern/traditional binary and the disciplined order associated with 'western' civil society and law enforcement. Thus, the competitive and contested ideologies and identities mapped onto the corporeal situate the body as the morphological substance of gender geopolitics at multiple scales.

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Notes

1. Mujahidin (holy war warriors) were separate religious and ethnically based factions that resisted the Soviet occupation. Seven Sunni-Islam groups received the bulk of US financial support. A notable example of the political uses of humanitarian aid during the Soviet occupation was the requirement that refugees affiliate with one of the seven Sunni Mujahidin groups in order to receive aid in Pakistan refugee camps (Goodhand 2002).
2. Attempting to control Afghan women and men from the state rather than from familial influence was a significant aspect of Taliban politics. Influences over the lives of women during the Taliban era both oppressed women and emasculated men from their privileged placement over women's lives (Kandiyoti 2007).
3. For example, the decision-making and conceptualization of choice in marriage is based on a complex and multiple sets of factors and a variety of family influences from both genders. In addition to these complexities, personal family decision-making may also be mitigated by outside political and apolitical forces such as poverty, fear, insecurity and forced mobility (Kandiyoti 2007; Smith 2009).
4. Research assistants included both local men and women who were university students. They were trained by the author and accompanied the author on several interviews before conducting their own. The author also hired a US-based research assistant who assisted with data collection and coding.
5. Participants were selected through snowball or chain sampling methods.
6. The *burqa*, known as the *chadori* in Afghanistan, is a garment worn by women in public space. This garment includes a cap that fits snugly on the head with a long flowing and pleated fabric that covers a woman's clothed body. The garment is worn floor length at the back and to the waist in front (without sleeves) the front portion often includes an embroidered design along the trim. When the *burqa* is drawn in front, the woman's face will be covered (with a mesh screen over the eyes). Women commonly remove the *burqa* from their faces when traversing public space when men are not in sight. Women will bring the *chadori/burqa* down over their eyes in the presence or within sight of a man who is not a *mahram* (close male relative, see note 10).
7. Those who did not wear a headscarf included women of various ages, backgrounds and religions. The one commonality among these women was their belief that the headscarf and to a larger extent the *chadori/burqa* was oppressive to women.
8. For example, respondents were not directly asked about their use of the headscarf (or lack thereof), however, the 'headscarf/*burqa* issue' was brought up by nearly all female respondents as part of their experiences or beliefs during the interview process.
9. These responses were provided through anonymous surveys rather than face-to-face interviews.
10. *Mahram* is a close male relative such as brother, father, grandfather, uncle, husband, son or grandson.
11. These signs are also posted outside restaurants that serve alcohol, because the consumption of alcohol is illegal in Afghanistan.
12. Kabul Compound refers to a shopping area that is open on Fridays for internationals. This structure is secured by a fenced perimeter with concrete structures, sandbags and laser-wire, and monitored by armed security personnel. One must have a foreign passport (or be accompanied by a foreigner) to enter. It is operated and maintained by the US military. International grocery stores cater to the international community. Some (particularly those that sell alcohol) only allow individuals with non-Afghan passports to enter.
13. For example, Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), publishes a 'Code of Conduct' for its membership (humanitarian, development and reconstruction). Membership is voluntary as is adherence to the code of conduct due to its inability to monitor the over 2,400 national and internationally registered NGOs operating throughout the country (ACBAR 2005; IRIN 2005).
14. This saying was commonly used by many respondents in reference to the popular saying 'What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas', in order to identify that an individual's behavior in Kabul does not follow him/her home or to his/her next job assignment.
15. Most international development and aid workers make salaries that are significantly higher than local Afghans. For example, in several cases internationals were paid between US\$15,000 and US\$30,000 per month for work, while a local Afghan worker in the same office was making between US\$250–500 per month.

16. Female research participants who discussed their relationships with Afghan men identified these men (in all cases) as current or former employees.
17. Family protections over women through their exclusion from these practices does not mean that Afghan women are not subject to acts of prostitution (through either violent coercion or economic desperation).

Notes on contributor

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

Pavos reales acorazados y cuerpos sustitutos: geopolítica de género en espacios de ayuda/desarrollo de Afganistán

Este artículo analiza la geopolítica corporizada en Afganistán por medio de las relaciones y roles de género entre trabajadores y trabajadoras internacionales y los/as receptores/as afganos/as de información, ayuda, desarrollo e (in)seguridad internacionales. Desde el punto de vista teórico, mi análisis se sitúa dentro de las geografías feministas críticas e incluye datos empíricos tomados de encuestas cualitativas, entrevistas, grupos de enfoque y observaciones de trabajadores y trabajadoras afganos/as e internacionales en Kabul, Afganistán (2006-2008). Existe un número importante y creciente de críticas y debates desde el ámbito académico feminista, sobre el enfoque generizado de la coalición internacional liderada por los EE. UU. en cuanto a ‘salvar’ a Afganistán de los talibanes. Intento hacer un aporte a estos estudios debatiendo sobre estos encuentros geopolíticos a la escala de las interacciones corporales. Específicamente, examino cómo la libertad generizada y las fantasías de salvación ilustran las prácticas espaciales de alterar a través de la exclusión y la intimidad, para luego centrarme en cómo estas son realizadas a través de la representación, el comportamiento, la movilidad y la sexualidad.

Palabras claves: geopolítica feminista; Afganistán; política de género; ayuda/desarrollo; trabajo sexual; conflicto

装甲孔雀与代理机构：阿富汗援助 / 发展空间中的性别 - 地缘 - 政治

本文透过介乎跨国移工与阿富汗接收跨国信息、援助、发展与安全（危险）之中以及之间的性别角色和性别关系，藉此检视阿富汗的身体化地缘政治。我的分析建构在批判女性主义地理学理论之上，并包含2006至2008年间在阿富汗喀布尔（Kabul）透过质性研究、访谈、焦点团体，以及观察阿富汗籍与跨国移工所搜集之经验资料。有显著且日益增加的女性主义批判与辩论，批评由美国主导的国际联盟「解放」由塔利班控制的阿富汗的性别化取径。我试图透过讨论这些地缘政治在身体尺度的互动，对该研究做出进一步贡献。我特别在讨论下列议题如何藉由再现、行为、流动性以及情欲展演之前，探讨性别化的自由以及救世主般的幻想如何透过排他性及亲密性勾勒出他者化的空间实践。

关键词：女性主义地缘政治、阿富汗、性别政治、援助 / 发展、性工作、冲突