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The Progress and Failure of the Women's Liberation Movement in Afghanistan:

**A Global Mission of
Challenging and Rethinking
Ideas about Freedom,
Democracy, and Justice in a
Post-9/11 World**



Introduction

“Tonight, I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda, and a terrorist who’s responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent men, women, and children” (Obama “Osama Bin Laden Dead”). This is a powerful opening line from President Barack Obama’s speech on May 1, 2011, because it illustrates Obama’s participation in the logic of masculine protection by leading the fight against one of the most dangerous men in the world. The speech marked a victory for the United States and a turning point in the war in Afghanistan. But also, it was a huge turning point for the many Afghan women treated as “victims” in need of saving and who were searching for an identity. Obama later went on to note that “we went to war against al Qaeda to protect our citizens, our friends, and our allies” (Obama “Osama Bin Laden Dead”). Although Obama’s reasons to go to war focus on preventing future terrorist attacks within the United States, there is no doubt that going to war in the Middle East has had huge implications, both positive and negative, for Afghan women. Fast forward a month later in June 2011 when he made prominent that “we won’t try to make Afghanistan a perfect place that is the responsibility of the Afghan government, which must step up its ability to protect its [own] people” (Obama “Remarks by the President on the Way Forward”). These three lines from two significant speeches Obama made in 2011 after the killing of Osama bin Laden not only show the gendered language and the logic of masculine protection he uses to talk about the war in Afghanistan, but these rhetorical speeches also illustrate how his language has changed from 2008 to today in crucial ways in relation to talking about the movement for women’s freedom, domestic and international.

Purpose and Focus of Final Project

Thus, the purpose of this project is to critically analyze four presidential speeches from Obama and discuss how they challenge ideas about Iris Young's theory about the logic of masculine protection, women's rights, and the movement towards global democracy. These four speeches were from 2009 to 2012, but they still have many significant implications for 2013. They were selected for analysis because they all address the war in Afghanistan in some way. Based on these four speeches, I will argue that since his election to U.S. presidency in 2008, President Obama has taken on a masculinist protector role in justifying the war on terror that victimized women in the Middle East, but since the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2012, the President has challenged Americans to think differently about freedom, democracy, and justice for those oppressed in Afghanistan; has challenged the Afghan government to take on the role of masculine protector for its own people; and has pointed a way forward in Afghanistan and in the world for all groups of people to participate in a more democratic, equal society.

Obama's Participation in the Logic of Masculinist Protection

After analyzing the war rhetoric of Obama, it is evident that the president is participating in the logic of masculinist protection by telling men and women in America one version of the truth about the war in Afghanistan, and that truth is being used to persuade Americans of their country's actions in the war. Specifically, President Obama brought women's rights, and human rights in general, to the forefront of foreign policy within the Middle East region when he said in 2009 that "Afghanistan has an elected government, but it is undermined by corruption and has difficulty delivering basic services to its people. The economy is undercut by a booming narcotics trade that encourages criminality and funds the insurgency. The people of Afghanistan seek the promise of a better future. Yet once again, we've seen the hope of a new day darkened by violence and uncertainty" (Obama "Remarks by the President on a new"). In this speech,

Obama is referring to the violence of al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden that has hurt and oppressed the Afghan people, the Afghan government, Afghan democracy, and Afghan freedom for men, women, and children. As a result, Obama is participating in the logic of masculinist protection to “save” Afghan women from al-Qaeda, a global militant Islamist organization started by Bin Laden, by narrating his (Obama’s) version of the truth about Afghan women, a truth that victimizes and diminishes the national and personal identity of these women. The logic of masculinist protection is an idea that Iris Young critiques in her essay, “The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State.” For Young, “in this patriarchal logic, the role of the masculine protector puts those protected, paradigmatically women and children, in a subordinate position of dependence and obedience” (Young 2). This is a significant point to consider because much of Obama’s rhetoric is focused on his perspective or his truth, which is that the Afghan people, specifically women, need saving from al Qaeda and protection from the United States military, even though “saving” may not be in the best cultural interests of Muslim women and children. For example, Obama states in his address on March 27, 2009, that “as their ranks dwindle, an enemy that has nothing to offer the Afghan people but terror and repression must be further isolated. And we will continue to support the basic human rights of all Afghans – including women and girls” (Obama “Remarks by the President on a new”). This statement is the most important and most powerful statement that Obama makes in the entire speech because it is not only the second time that Obama mentions the “basic human rights” of the Afghan people – “including women and girls.” But also, this statement clearly illustrates how Obama has unintentionally subordinated and diminished the role of the Afghan people to be in control of their own destinies and make their own autonomous decisions. In this case, the male protector, the president of the United States, marginalizes those voices on the periphery of the public

sphere, a place where multiple voices or perspectives in the world come together to get the results they want in society. As a result from this speech in 2009, Obama makes known his version of the truth about the Afghans', specifically women's and girls', cultural experiences and situation by diminishing the voices of the Afghan women and girls, voices which would allow these women and girls to express their own versions of the truth about their situation and identity to their government and to the world.

Furthermore, Obama's gendered language to talk about the war supports the dominant power of Western countries and their ideas about justice, equality, and women's rights at the expense of undermining and diminishing cultural and regional differences about how justice, equality, and freedom are defined and talked about within different social groups around the world. For example, in his speech on June 22, 2011, Obama "signaled a new threat to our security – one in which the targets were no longer soldiers on a battlefield, but innocent men, women, and children going about their daily lives" (Obama "Remarks by the President on the Way Forward"). Here, it is crucial to note that Obama is not only stating that United States citizens are innocent victims, but he is also stating that those men, women, and children on the ground in Afghanistan are innocent and apparently helpless. By stating who the "innocent" are, Obama is making cultural assumptions about who is worthy and deserving of help in society (that is, he is signaling out which social groups are too weak to make their own decisions). Donileen Loseke, sociologist from the University of South Florida, takes issue with Obama's evaluation because "what constitutes great harm to one person might be evaluated by another as not so harmful; what indicates innocence in creating harm to one person might indicate complicity to another" (Loseke 504). In other words, Obama creates an undesirable identity for the "victims" of al-Qaeda, specifically women and children, by denying the weak, helpless

“victims” of daily life their cultural, national, and personal identities. Comparatively, this example is similar to why women in the United States and around the world do not like to be identified as rape or sexual assault “victims” because “they believe the identity is undesirable and encourages other to treat them as if they are unable to make their own decisions” (Loseke 506). Lila Abu-Lughod, anthropologist from Columbia University, would agree with Loseke that this language of portraying Afghan women as people who need saving from someone or something is ethically and morally wrong because “the project of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged” (Abu-Lughod 789). Abu-Lughod brings up an important point because there is no one correct truth about what “salvation,” “democracy,” and “freedom” mean in today’s world. It is true that the struggle for justice, equality, and freedom in the world is a global phenomenon, but there are cultural and regional differences that must be respected in the world in order for justice to be significant. For Muslim women, justice and freedom are unique and significant to their social group because there is a certain, effective vocabulary that is shared among the Muslims in the Middle East, and they share an embedded cultural knowledge about what certain terms like “equality,” “freedom,” “independence,” and “democracy” really signify. In other words, to justify the war in Afghanistan, Obama identified the people of Afghanistan as individual “victims” separated from their national identity rather than identifying the cultural unity of the people and the government as a coherent social discourse. As a result, the cultural knowledge and power of the United States diminished the cultural knowledge and power of the Afghan people to come together as a social group and advance human rights.

The Obama Administration’s Participation in Cultural Imperialism

By asserting the United States as masculinist protector, the Obama administration is participating in a form of oppression against the Afghan people, which can be defined further as

a powerful and undemocratic form of cultural imperialism. According to Iris Young in her book, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, cultural imperialism “involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm” (Young 59). This cultural imperialism that the United States participates in results in a loss of a sense of progress and improvement for the Afghan people and the Afghan government. As Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, secretary general of NATO from 2004 - 2009, states, “we must do better in showing that there is tangible, steady progress in reaching our goal – and in reminding the world that the Taliban [and al Qaeda] remain the ruthless killers and abusers of human rights they have always been.” Thus, Obama has been put into a difficult situation since his election in 2008. On the one hand, the president has the responsibility to protect his own people from any security threats because as an intending agent with power, he moves people with his words and his version of the truth to make America safer, even though this truth might not mean progress for the construction of democracy and equality in the Middle East. But on the other hand, Obama’s task is also to “critically explore what we might do to help create a world in which those poor Afghan women, for whom the hearts of those in the civilized world break, can have safety and decent lives” (Abu-Lughod 790). It is significant to point out the cultural imperialism that Abu-Lughod is pointing to in her article. Specifically, early on in his presidency, Obama was distancing himself and the American people from the Afghan people as a distant spectator by making the distinction between those in the “civilized world” and “those poor Afghan women” who represent the “uncivilized world.” Afghan women are clearly marked as the significant “Other” in Obama’s early speeches (before the killing of Bin Laden) because of the masculine protector’s failure to recognize this specific, unified social group’s perspective and version of the truth about human and women rights.

Obama Setting the Framework for Conversations about Women's Rights

Although his speeches point towards a masculine protector role, Obama has helped start the dialogue for talking about international women's rights and has helped create a safer, equal world for Afghan women through his language in his speeches immediately after the killing of Bin Laden. In practice, Obama, knowingly and unknowingly, has set discursive limits on what is allowable and what is not allowable in the war in Afghanistan because of his international power as president of the United States as well as because of his father/protector role of those being denied democracy. Specifically, in a speech on March 27, 2009, Obama states that "for the Afghan people, a return to Taliban rule [from 1996 to 2001] would condemn their country to brutal governance, international isolation, a paralyzed economy, and the denial of basic human rights to the Afghan people – especially women and girls... But we will seek lasting partnerships with Afghanistan and Pakistan that promise a new day for their people" (Obama "Remarks by the President on a new"). Earlier in my project, I referenced this same speech using a different quote, but both quotes still emphasized the "basic human right" of Afghan people – "especially women and girls." Therefore, this statement is crucial to understand because as a man with power, Obama is setting the terms and vocabulary for women's rights and in general for human rights in the Middle East and in countries around the world with his speeches. For Obama, what is not allowable is the return of the Taliban, an Islamic political movement in Afghanistan, or the continuation of al-Qaeda's dominance over the Afghan people. At the beginning of this speech in 2009, Obama framed the war in Afghanistan with what Alletta Brenner in her essay, "Speaking of 'Respect for Women,'" would call the "'Us vs. Them' dialogical frame" (Brenner 20). In other words, Obama distinguished the "good men" from the "bad men." In this case, the good men are the Americans and the bad men are a part of al-Qaeda who are denying basic human rights to men, women, and children overseas. For Brenner, "the United States is framed not only

as innocent, but as fundamentally different from those ‘evil doers’ elsewhere who have no respect for human life” (Brenner 21). Brenner’s perspective is significant because it shows the logic for Obama linking the war with women’s rights abroad (that is, defend those from “evil” who appear to be defenseless), even though women in the United States still struggle for their voices to be heard today. From this speech in 2009, it is critical to take away the fact that Obama is setting the tone and the framework for the conversations people will have about international women’s rights in the future; these conversations are being framed from an American’s view out onto the world, dominant conversations which make invisible the conversations from men, women, and children in Afghanistan.

A New Perspective: Obama’s Rhetoric of Equality and Democracy

It is critical to take note that before the killing of Bin Laden, the Afghan people were marked as the significant “Other” or “victims” by the United States in Obama’s rhetoric. But after May 2011, that “Other” being distanced from Obama’s goals and plans became al Qaeda. As Obama distanced the Western world from al Qaeda by capturing and killing Bin Laden, Americans drew closer in connecting with the Afghan people as equals. That connection became clear when Obama sent a strong message to the people of Afghanistan: “as you stand up, you will not stand alone”.... the partnership between the United States and Afghanistan includes “shared commitments to combat terrorism and strengthen democratic institutions” (Obama “Remarks by the President in Address”). According to Michael Ferguson, from the University of Colorado, Boulder, “this rhetorical strategy works, then by redeploying an existing narrative of chivalry: Those who respect their women are civilized; those who do not are barbarians” (Ferguson 21). This “rhetoric of respect” that Ferguson wrote about may appear to advance women’s rights in the Middle East, but in practice, women’s rights has only become a peripheral issue in the war because Obama is really just reframing an argument for traditional gender roles

by distancing himself from al Qaeda. On the one hand, Obama justifies the secretive plan to kill Bin Laden by claiming that the United States is the masculine protector for the Afghan people, which represents the failure of the women's rights and liberation movement in Afghanistan. However, Obama rhetorically constructs his plan in ending the war by using gendered language to not only empower the Afghan government to protect their own people but also to free Afghan women from oppression, which represents the progress of the women's rights and liberation movement in Afghanistan. For example, in one of his speeches in 2012, Obama asserts that "Afghans want to fully assert their sovereignty and build a lasting peace. That requires a clear timeline to wind down the war" (Obama "Remarks by President Obama in Address"). Thus, Obama calls for an equal "partnership" between the United States and the oppressed people in the war-torn countries, expressing not a need for saving stereotypical damsels-in-distress or "victims" but for allowing the Afghan government to protect a group of people with their own knowledge, culture, and terminology for talking about women's liberation.

Obama Transferring Masculine Power to the Afghan Government

By analyzing several texts from Obama about the war in Afghanistan and the liberation of Muslim women, it is evident that Obama has taken on the role of masculine protector, which meant the Afghan people losing autonomy to the dominant discourse. But as the president outlines his plans to end the war, he shifts his goals of protection of the Afghan people to that of challenging the Afghan government to step up to the role of the "good man" or the "good father" protecting his own women and children. In many of his speeches about the war after May 1, 2011, Obama uses egalitarian, democratic language to allow and enable all Afghan citizens, including women, to become a valuable part of a democratic, egalitarian nation. He uses language to give Afghanistan the power to develop their own secure nation rather than being reliant on the dominant perspective in the West, which would force the Afghan people into

further subordination and hopelessness. For example, on May 1, 2012, President Obama addresses the American public from the Bagram Air Base in Kabul, Afghanistan. His purpose in delivering this speech was not so much to reminisce on the past (that is, the one-year anniversary of killing Osama Bin Laden), but rather, his purpose was to inform Americans about the agreement made between the United States and Afghanistan that day and to outline a timeline for ending the war so that “as our coalition agreed, by the end of 2014 the Afghans will be fully responsible for the security of their country” (Obama “Remarks by President Obama in Address”). In addition, Obama states within the same speech that “as we move forward, some people will ask why we need a firm timeline [to end the war]. The answer is clear: our goal is not to build a country in America’s image our goal is to destroy al Qaeda, and we are on a path to do exactly that” (Obama “Remarks by President Obama in Address”) These statements illustrate a powerful transfer of power and responsibility. Specifically, through his rhetorical discourse, Obama is slowly transferring his power as the masculine protector of Afghan women over to the Afghan government so that the Afghans can create and build their own identities, their own institutions, and their own country in their own image as a connected social group. To this very day, this transfer of power and responsibility to the Afghan government increases the autonomy of the Afghan people to make their own choices and decisions, but at the same time, it does not necessarily diminish oppression because the masculinist protector is still dominant in Afghanistan.

Through his words, Obama participates as the masculine protector for the American people and for the Afghan people. For example, Obama mentions in one of his speeches that he is speaking in Afghanistan because “it was here, from within these borders, that al Qaeda launched the attacks that killed nearly 3,000 innocent men, women, and children. And, so ten

years ago, the United States and our allies went to war to make sure that al Qaeda could never again use this country to launch attacks against us” (Obama “Remarks by President Obama in Address”). Here, it is important to examine that Obama is still justifying the war in Afghanistan in order to save the Afghan people, the American people, and people around the globe from future attacks. However, as Jaap de Hoop Scheffer argues, “the basic problem in Afghanistan is not too much Taliban [or too much al Qaeda]; it’s too little good governance. Afghans need a government that deserves their loyalty and trust” (Scheffer). This is an interesting argument by Scheffer because rather than focusing on protecting a country like Afghanistan from the harms of al-Qaeda or from the return of Taliban rule, it is more significant for the United States to shift into a supporting role for the Afghan people so that they themselves can build up the appropriate democratic institutions that will keep citizens safe and secure.

Obama clearly articulates this new support role for him and the United States when he states that the agreement between Afghanistan and the United States “supports Afghan efforts to advance development and dignity for their people. And it includes Afghan commitments to transparency and accountability, and to protect the human rights of all Afghans – men and women, boys and girls” (Obama “Remarks by President Obama in Address”). Here, Obama uses language not to portray Afghan women as “victims” of al-Qaeda or the Taliban, but rather, he utilizes language to transfer power over to “all Afghans – men and women” who struggle to protect their own rights. It is significant to take away from this text that Obama emphasizes both the empowerment and liberation of both men and women (boys and girls) because as Michael L. Ferguson writes, “a democracy is a form of government that respects the rights of all of its citizens – whether male or female. Therefore, it is in the interests of U.S. national security to support women’s rights in Iraq in order to make sure that the new Iraqi government is indeed a

democratic one” (Ferguson 26). Thus, whether as a supporter or as a protector of human rights in the Middle East, Barack Obama and the United States will continue to view Afghan men and women as the “other,” subordinate discourse compared to superior discourses in Western countries. However, on May 1, 2012, by using the themes of unity and equality, Obama reframed reality to make Afghan men, women, and children, this relatively invisible, unspoken “other” group, have a perspective and a voice in a more equal, democratic society.

Conclusion: The Movement Towards Global Democracy and Equality

The logic of masculinist protection is just one version of the truth about the world or one perspective on how people see the world through a gendered lens. After analyzing several of Obama’s speeches regarding the war in Afghanistan, it is evident that the president is a participant in this logic to not only tell Americans his version of the truth about the protection of human rights, security, and safety within the borders of the United States but also to tell his American perspective about the protection of human rights abroad and to tell his version of the truth about the progress and failure of the women’s liberation movement in Afghanistan. It is important to note that Obama is a participant in the logic of masculinist protection to justify America’s presence in the Middle East, but he is not an advocate of this patriarchal logic that subordinates the roles of women and children in a democratic world. To justify the war in Afghanistan and the killing of Osama Bin Laden, so much effort for the Obama administration went into using the logic of masculinist protection to save the “victims” and “innocent” men, women, and children from the Taliban and al-Qaeda and to protect the rights of the Afghan people, which created this unequal power distribution between Obama and Afghan government leaders and between American women and Afghan women.

However, today, as President Obama begins to withdraw troops from the Middle East and envisions the end of the war, that imbalance of power is starting to shift as Obama uses more

democratic, egalitarian language to emphasize that the mission to kill Bin Laden and to defeat al-Qaeda was not justified because of the United States' great power and wealth in the world (see quote below) but was justified to express America's commitment to the daily struggle for equality for all groups of people in all countries around the world. Especially for the Afghan women who have been under the rule of the oppressive forces of Bin Laden and al-Qaeda for so long, the possibility of a more equal, democratic society cannot be denied. Obama started the conversation about the international women's liberation movement, and now, it is our turn. Therefore, as citizens of this world, it is our critical literacy project, now and in the future, to challenge and rethink ideas about freedom, democracy, and justice in a post-9/11 world.



“Let us remember that we can do these things not just because of wealth and power, but because of who we are: one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Thank you.”

~President Barack Obama addressing the United States on the killing of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011.

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