

Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women

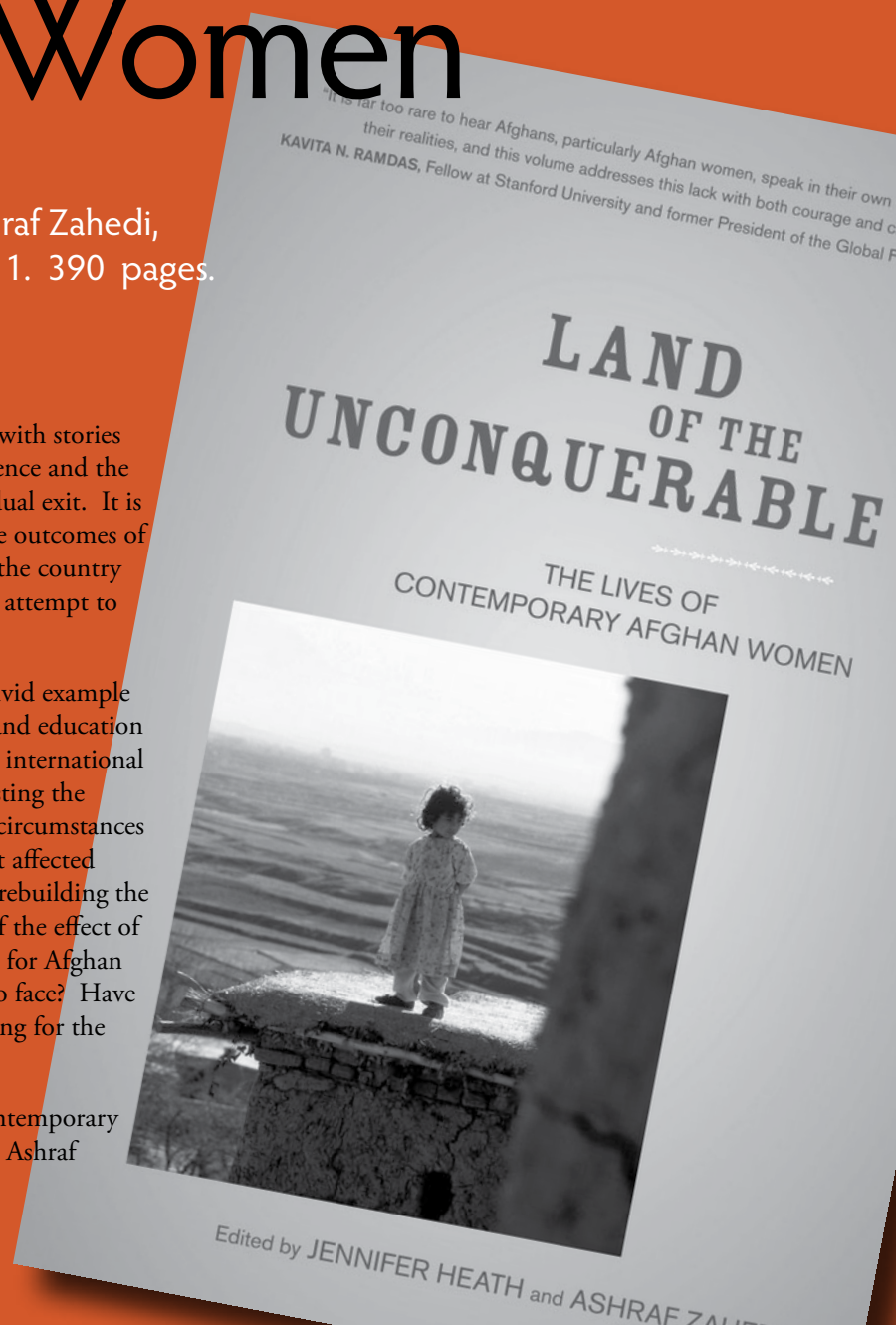
Edited by Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi,
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a book review by Eva Sajoo

Afghanistan once again hogs the headlines with stories divided between the ongoing episodes of violence and the preparations of international troops for a gradual exit. It is definitely an appropriate time to reflect on the outcomes of international involvements in Afghanistan as the country is one of the most prominent examples of the attempt to apply UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

Afghanistan came to represent an especially vivid example of female exclusion when the empowerment and education of Afghan women became a major concern as international forces entered the country in 2001. After ousting the Taliban, policies designed to address the dire circumstances of illiteracy, poverty, seclusion and silence that affected Afghan women were proclaimed priorities in rebuilding the country. Now a decade later, an assessment of the effect of those policies is due. Has there been progress for Afghan women? What challenges do they continue to face? Have they been included in peace talks or in planning for the reconstruction of their country?

Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women edited by Jennifer Heath and Ashraf



Zahedi provides a cogent and compelling response to these questions. This book is focused on the lives of Afghan women today. Despite the growing list of titles which promise to illuminate this subject, a few can be credited on bringing such a thorough and wide-ranging approach to the task.

Afghan women have long been symbols of competing ideologies, their challenges sensationalised, and their context ignored. This book provides a welcome corrective in dealing with the multi-dimensional aspects of their lived experiences. It has anecdotal chapters which humanise the problems that are so often reported as statistics and help the reader understand how people find themselves in such dire circumstances, instead of focusing on their victimhood. It is also rich with analytical detail and case studies. What makes this book affective is that it captures the voices of Afghan women themselves, and depict the many ways of which they navigate the complex challenges they face to improve their lives.

The book is divided into five parts. Part 1: Perceptions and Realities which deal with the ways the Afghan women are represented. Shireen Burki's chapter, "The Politics of Zan" provides an excellent overview of the history of national reforms for women's rights. Previous governments in Afghanistan have seen women as symbols of modernisation, and sought to implement rapid, often coercive change. Such policies invariably provoked resistance, particularly because the authority and control of a central government in Afghanistan has always been tenuous. For western governments and NGOs too, Afghan women have been symbolic, though the focus has often been on measures of liberty and progress that are often devised without consulting the women themselves. The book challenges western perceptions that liberation can be measured by the number of women wearing burqas, or that the women "below" them are helpless victims. Anne Brodsky's chapter, "Centuries of Threat, Centuries of Resistance" reveals a lengthy but less known history of the many ways in which Afghan women have worked against injustice in their society.

Part 2: A Woman's Place, deals directly with policies designed to fulfill UN Resolution 1325 by giving women a voice in Parliament and politics. In "Women's Political Presence: A Path to Promoting Gender Interests?" Anna Larson challenges the logic of the quota system, which currently requires that twenty eight percent of the seats in Parliament be reserved for women. Among the unintended results of this

rule is the fact that male members of Parliament (MP) now regard this number as a limit, the rest of the seats are reserved for men. The quota also undermines the legitimacy of female candidates, critically seen as token appointees, even if they have received enough votes to be elected on their own right.

The other assumption of the quota system is that women will be united by shared interests, and therefore constitute a voice for women's rights in general. Larson shows that more often, they are influenced by other considerations, including regional, ethnic, and personal divisions, forcing a reconsideration of the effectiveness of this strategy. This part of the book also features interviews with Massouda Jalal, Malalai Joya, Fawzia Koofi and Azita Rafat, all members of Parliament who further illuminate the struggles women face in politics. The other chapters deal with issues affecting the majority of women, such as how to deal with a justice system and a society that continue to operate more in accordance with customs rather than the law.

There are many excellent case studies in this book for development workers and academics alike. In addition to providing detailed examples of projects that have succeeded and policies that have failed in Afghanistan, there were reflections and discussions involving the international development community. Analysis of the rhetorics and policies of aid organisations in Afghanistan are found in Chapter 18. The key approaches in development such as Women In Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) which were discussed in Chapter 19 of the book, puts Afghanistan in a larger context. Too often, in ignoring the priorities of Afghan women themselves, and the cultural sensitivities of the society in which they live, development initiatives in Afghanistan seem to be a mere application of the latest global apparatus. It is an apparatus that seems to keep making the same mistakes, or is inevitably driven by its own logic and packaged technical solutions, disregarding the particular context in which they are being applied.

One of the major points that many authors bring to light is the failure to engage with Afghan men, or the tendency to see them only as oppressors or obstacles to be circumvented, rather than as potential partners for change. As presidential

candidate Massouda Jalal noted in Chapter 7, the fate of Afghanistan is like a bird with two wings, one male and one female. It will not fly unless they work together. There are positive examples of development projects for women's advancement that have worked for Afghan men with much success. Rachel Lehr's account of the creation of Rubia, an NGO she founded to create employment for Afghan women, shows that this can be done. She makes a case that without including men, progress is shaky at best.

The other significant theme that has emerged in many of the chapters is the failure to make use of another indigenous resource for women's empowerment: Islam. This may come as a surprise to some in the activist community who are accustomed to seeing religion in general, and Islam in particular, as an implacable obstacle to women's rights. Sakena Yacoobi, founder of the Afghanistan Institute for Learning (AIL) established in a refugee camp in Peshawar in 1995, has been providing education to women in communities throughout Afghanistan since its formation. She attributes the success of her organisation largely to its sensitivity to local values. This includes having her staff model recognise cultural virtues while locating human rights awareness training within the framework of Islam.

This framework gives great legitimacy to women's aspirations, and disarms reactionaries who have often claimed that human rights and women empowerment are "western" concepts that go against local religion and culture. Several other contributors assert that educational campaigns that articulate women's rights in Islamic terms have great potentials in altering the widespread abuse of religion which justify the patriarchal status quo. While religion is often excluded from development projects and frameworks for women's rights, Afghan women do not see being Muslim and seeking equality as mutually exclusive. They fit within a larger global reality, of women working with and through their cultural and religious resources to bring about change.

Part 5 with its focus on art and culture, provides a rare glimpse of the Afghanistan that rarely gets reported in western media. Aunohita Mojumdar analyses the role of Afghan media, especially the radio, in building new avenues of communication and virtual interaction that can overcome geographical distance and ethno-cultural barriers. Women are especially affected, as radio provides information to remote communities with low literacy levels, as well as an avenue for self expression

through call-in programmes. Such precious opportunities are also supplied by the nascent contemporary art movement which Lauryn Oates records. While some might see art as a trivial pursuit in a country still ravaged by conflict, Oates contends that "the right to make and access art is fundamentally linked to cultural renaissance and national identity, unity, and stability - women's participation in arts and culture can ultimately dismantle some of the structures that facilitated Afghanistan's descent into chaos." Other chapters of the book include the works of contemporary female poets presenting beautifully translated poetry. These accounts reveal other ways in which Afghan women are reclaiming their traditions and challenging many areas of the world they live in.

In assessing the last decade of international involvement in Afghanistan, it is clear that some progress has been made. Yet many opportunities have been missed. Despite initial claims that assisting Afghan women was a primary goal of the international community, there has been more lip service than actual delivery. There is fewer mention of women now as attention has shifted to expedient strategies in exiting the country, even if it means empowering the very parties that excluded women in the first place.

Land of the Unconquerable is unique in the range of perspectives and fields that it brings together. From politics and education to economics and art, this book gives justice to the incredibly varied experiences of Afghan women. A rich mixture of interviews, narratives, case studies, and analysis, it will appeal to academics, activists and most about anyone interested in the unconquerable lives of Afghan women. In presenting the views coming from Afghans themselves, it often challenges assumptions that we have been accustomed to making about Afghan women, and the ideas and policies that have defined our perceptions of them and interactions with them. ■

About the Author

Eva Sajoo is a Research Associate with the Centre for the Comparative Study of Muslim Societies and Cultures at Simon Fraser University. Her work focuses on the rights of women in transitional societies, and she has a special interest in Afghanistan. She is a member of Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WA) and resides in Vancouver, Canada.