

# MASTER'S THESIS

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## Confronting gender issues regarding the war in Afghanistan – A feminist perspective on the effects of war

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## **Abstract**

War is seldom contributing to gender issues in a positive way. The war in Afghanistan in the last two decades has, however, been used as a tool to better the conditions of gender issues in Afghanistan. Since the extremist group, Taliban, seized power over Kabul in 1996, women's rights in Afghanistan have been deteriorating. In 2001, as a US-led military invasion began, the debates over women's issues exploded. The Islamic approach on gender issues which was established during the Taliban era were challenged by the war initiated by the West. Women's rights became subject for political campaigns and the 2001 Afghan war was often addressed as a tool to lighten gender issues in Afghanistan. The structures in the Afghan society during the war which targeted genders differently are confronted and analyzed through the prism of postcolonial feminism. During the war gender issues in Afghanistan went through big structural changes in favor of women's rights. International pressure, democratic elections and the focus on gender issues gave Afghan women access to education, permission to take part in the working labor and political institutions which were improving women's rights, like the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Presidents demanding improvement on gender issues. The war contributed to several steps of progress for gender issues. However, the instability and violence that is a natural consequence of war has also been challenging on gender issues. The damage caused by military attacks made women and men carry the burdens disproportionately. In addition, gender issues were mostly addressed in context of women's rights and did not give room to address the gender issues which affects men the most. The topic of gender issues regarding war remains important for future wars and conflicts and for the future of Afghanistan.

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# **1 Introduction**

## ***1.1 Background***

CARE Norway, a development and emergency aid organization for women, states that women in working life are as valuable as the oil is to Norway (CARE Norway, n.d.), and the same statement is made in an article published in the Norwegian newspaper VG in 2016 by journalist, economist and writer Shazia Majid (Majid, 2016). This indicates the importance of gender equality for the economic growth for a country. It also highlights the importance of feminism in international relations and politics. Furthermore, the importance of feminism in context of war is even bigger since women in war have a heightened chance of becoming victims of gender-based violence during war and in post-conflict times (United Nations, OHCHR).

Gender issues are defined as “*any issue or concern determined by gender-based and/or sex-based differences between women and men*” (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.). The unequal distribution of burdens between genders and the gender-based assumptions are laying a foundation for continued gender issues in many aspects of the lived lives of people globally. Men and women living under any circumstances can be a victim of gender issues. Although gender issues can occur during peace, the gender issues are severely changed during war as civilians are often an important part of war, and men and women are given different roles and carry the burdens of war differently (Hernes, 2007). Women in war are often seen as a neutral party and the men are the participating part which are protecting women and children or other family members. However, the protection women and children supposedly are receiving during war are often nonexistent. Due to civilians being a large part of the war and women not being a traditional part of the military, the women are often being left alone at home in charge of providing for the family, and they are often more at risk of being victims of violence compared to men (Hernes, 2007). However, this has changed and women now participate in military actions more than before, giving gender issues in combat a place in the analysis of gender issues in war (Hernes, 2007). The recent outbreak of the war in Ukraine has shown how women and girls are at risk for carrying multiple burdens due to the war and instability in the country. CARE Norway has been signaling concerns for women that are being exploited through abuse or trafficking, and the lack of registration of refugees from Ukraine to neighboring countries and the access to reproductive health care (CARE Norway, n.d.). The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs brought up the same concerns as CARE Norway. In the Ukrainian war men are being recruited to participate in war, while women are being left alone, like Hernes

stated. The burdens of combat are in this case left to the men, and women are being forced to flee the country and are set in a heightened risk for sexual violence and trafficking, and they often inhabit the role as the only provider for the family after the breakout of the war (Eriksdatter Giske, 2022). The traditional roles of men and women are in large carried by the war as men stay in Ukraine to fight in combat and women has to flee the country with their children. The situation for women and men are not unique for the Ukrainian war. War often forces people to flee their homes and livelihoods and become internally displaced people. The burden of war for internally displaced people can often affect women and men disproportionately, for example through absence of adequate reproductive health care and responses, the loss of livelihoods due to loss of land and livestock or loss of housing and land due to lack of property titles (United Nations, OHCHR). About 80% of refugees and those displaced by violence are women (Buvinic, Das Gupta, Casabonne, & Verwimp, 2012). Giving women a prospect full of burdens due to their role in war and conflict. However, men are also facing different burdens during war: those who typically suffer the highest mortality in conflicts are young adult men, often participating in combat (Buvinic, Das Gupta, Casabonne, & Verwimp, 2012). Both examples are cases of gender issues regarding war, and both can in turn give an extended consequence for society, especially economically.

Hernes (2007) mentioned the change in gender participation in combat briefly, where women more often than before play a part in combat. The participation raises the question of gender issues in combat. The gendered assumption of masculinity and femininity for men and women (Peterson, 2010) which is internalized, have formed the assumption that men are the participating part in combat. However, as women are joining as combatants there can be a shift in the gender issues related to war. The number of deaths in combat can become more equally distributed between men and women. However, as mentioned in relation to the Ukrainian war for example, war increases women's risk of being victims of different types of sexual violence. During combat women are still women and men are still men (Cockburn, 2013) which means that female combatants might face some of the same issues and challenges as other women in war.

In the war in Afghanistan the gender issues are also affected by the presence of Taliban. By what we know about the Taliban and its systematic oppression of women through, for example, denying women access to education and freedom of movement and allowing domestic violence towards women by not giving the victims protection or support to escape (Amnesty

International, 2022), and the more general effects of war on gender issues, the war in Afghanistan is especially interesting with regards to gender issues.

## ***1.2 Topic***

Afghanistan is sometimes referred to as *the graveyard of empires* due to the multiple invasion attempts of the country by foreign great powers in the past. It has been many years since the country could be considered peaceful, and in 1996 when the Taliban seized power over Kabul and gave Al-Qaeda permission to establish its headquarters in the country the situation may have gotten worse (Nye Jr & Welch, 2017). A few years later, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the world was shook by the terrorist attacks on American soil. One of the most influential countries in the international society had experienced an act of terrorism conducted on its territory and was forced to respond. The war on terror began on Afghan soil a few weeks later and the civilians had to face the fact that their home was now a battlefield for the war on terror. Women and children had already lost a lot of the freedom they once had to Taliban, and the situation through war and its consequences made their living conditions worse. Although there has been more than one conflict in Afghanistan, the topic of this thesis revolves around gender issues in the 2001 Afghan war, including how the Taliban, the international society, national politics and combat had an effect on gender issues.

During the years before the outbreak of the war, the Taliban was in control of Afghanistan leaving gender issues in a position where men and women were separated by the laws in virtue of their gender. The Islamic Law is what is considered the supreme law, and is a law based on the religion of Islam (Hozyainova, 2014). The Taliban, however, ruled based on the Sharia laws, which in comparison to the Islamic Law that is evolving through human constructs, denotes the ideal of God's law (Hozyainova, 2014). As Taliban continued to seize power of more parts of Afghanistan, women's rights were revoked. Education, freedom of movement and the freedom of choosing what to wear became distant memories for the women in Afghanistan, while the violence of the Taliban group affected the whole civilization in some way (Samar, 2019). In 1998 the U.S. State Department Desk Officer for Afghanistan stated that the oppression of women was a part of the Afghan culture (Samar, 2019, p. 152). The link between law and culture is short, leaving the social norms and the structures of society to be highly affected by the laws. The Sharia law's way of separating women and men, and controlling almost every aspect of an Afghan woman's life, is challenged when it is confronted with the ideas of feminism and gender issues. The Sharia laws allow the society to make more

significant gender based differences with the law in hand. Postcolonial feminism, the theoretical framework of this thesis, targets these structures which target gender differently (Whitworth, 2018). Laws are the foundation for setting up structures for society. By this the Islamic and the Sharia laws are setting up for failure on gender issues, as the patriarchy is allowed by law. The 9/11-attacks were the triggering cause for the outbreak of the 2001 Afghan war. Many suggest that the US used women's rights as a tool for justification of the war (Samar, 2019). Regardless, women's rights were addressed during the period before and after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, by the Secretary General of NATO and the first lady of the US, among others. Addressing women's rights in particular is indicating that one gender needs more protection and is victimized by both the assumption that they are submissive to others and by the lack of rights like the right to education. Furthermore, by engaging in war through the assumption that a group of people is a victim will provoke the legacy of the colonialism to continue to influence the political ideas regarding war (Hu, 2019). By this an asymmetrical power relation is established and women and men are likely to have different prospects regarding the war's effect on their lives. Which is why the theoretical framework for examining gender issues in the 2001 Afghan war in this thesis is postcolonial feminism.

Through decades of war and international interference, women's position in the Afghan society is likely to have decreased or been affected throughout the years. As late as March 2022 the Women for Women organization said, "*Women were not meaningfully included during formal peace negotiations and in the many venues of decision-making as part of the same false dichotomy, contributing to the crisis that disproportionately affects Afghan women today.*" (Women for women international, 2022). Without even knowing anything specific about the war in Afghanistan, it is reasonable to believe that women's position in the war is as complicated and to some extent more difficult than men's in this war. Women in war and conflicts more often than not have less resources, political rights, authority, and control of their environment. In addition to this they often have the responsibility for the caretaking tasks of the family which limit their mobility and ability to protect themselves (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002). The presence of international forces on Afghan soil led to the fall of Taliban in December in 2001 (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The international, and mainly western, interference in the country also led to legal changes for gender issues (Reddy, 2014). The Ministry of Women's Affairs were established and women were allowed to participate in politics (Reddy, 2014). The country had signed international conventions like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of



Discrimination against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan & Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2010). But without a government for administration and legislative measures to give real legal backing, the conventions did little for the experienced gender issues of people in Afghanistan (Reddy, 2014).

On October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2001, then NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson, came with a press release which included the following words: *“This operation is not directed against the people of Afghanistan. It is designed to strike against al-Qaida terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.”* (Robertson, 2001). The war was meant to force terrorist organizations to retreat and crumble. Their goal was to free the people of Afghanistan as well as the rest of the world from the fear of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. However, on November 17<sup>th</sup> 2001 Laura Bush, the first lady of the US at the time, announced the following: *“Only the terrorists and the Taliban forbid education to women.”* (Bush L. , 2001). The first lady is not an official decision-maker, but nonetheless she is still the first lady and has a significant influence on people through the role. Her announcement reached a lot of people and drew the attention to women’s rights in the conflict. This indicated that the war on terror was a war for human rights, but especially directed towards women. Later in the radio announcement she proceeded to say that *“I hope Americans will join our family in working to ensure that dignity and opportunity will be secured for all the women and children of Afghanistan.”* (Bush L. , 2001). The war was motivated by different goals, but there is no doubt the war has had a backdrop of feminist goals and approaches by some. The 2001 Afghan war started as a war on terror as a response to the 9/11-attacks, but developed fast into also being a war that was supposed to build a sufficient and democratic government and better the positions of Afghan women. Already in 2002 President Bush held a speech where he addressed a plan for constructing Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.).

The same year as President Bush stated that there was a need for a national reconstruction, a National Solidarity Program (NSP) was established. The goal of the program was to promote development in rural parts of Afghanistan. Gender equality was one of the main goals of the program (Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov, 2012). Given that the war was ongoing during the period the program was in action, the goals of the program might have been aiming for too high results. In the midterm evaluation in 2006 there had been some progress for gender equality in some of the regions the program was enacted, but not in every region. In addition to this, the

representation in power and influence in the project process had typically been limited to men (Barakat & Strand, 2006). The asymmetrical influence in important organs of institutions were not limited to NSP. During the war and the attempt of building a functioning democracy had led to democratic elections for presidents. President Ghani won the election in 2014 (Adili & van Bijlert, 2016). Although the government was not strong enough to have real power in context of having monopoly on violence and security forces to handle the security situation, the President did intend to take measures for women's rights. He nominated Anisa Rassouli as the first ever female nominee to the supreme court (Rasmussen, 2015). She lost in parliament, and was not elected. The nomination was an improvement from the Taliban regime when women were not allowed to participate. Anisa met the criteria for being qualified for the job as a judge in the supreme court, but she met gender-based obstacles which prevented her from getting voted in. The arguments used against her were based on assumptions that she, as a woman, was too tender and soft for giving the right punishments (Raghavan, 2015).

Gender issues have to be mostly women-oriented when examining the 2001 Afghan war. Women had been restricted of rights before the outbreak of the war. After the fall of the Taliban and the international pressure to better the women's situation, the 2004 constitution stated that at least 25 per cent of delegates in parliament had to be women (Reddy, 2014). The problem was, the structural changes which were supposed to confront gender issues were seen as more symbolic, rather than a real change (Reddy, 2014). While changes were done "on paper" women were still on the outside of the peacebuilding processes giving them little real changes from the Taliban regime-era. There were also reports on women who did not receive protection from the security soldiers, and were instead told to not participate in politics as this would keep them from making enemies (Gregory, 2011). The security soldiers' advice show that the security for women who did speak up was not taken seriously. There were cases of women activists who got murdered or severely injured by the Taliban for speaking their mind, perhaps the most known is Malala Yousafzai. She was shot in Pakistan, but the Taliban were behind the attack. Nevertheless it shows that the women who spoke their mind and tried to participate in important policy processes were doing so with their lives at the risk, while security forces did not always find their safety as something to be taken seriously.

Afghan civilians were living under circumstances which made the economy and their life prospects difficult because of war. As mentioned before men and women face different issues regarding war. While men are forced to join the military risking their lives in combat, and

therefore having the most mortality and other physiological and psychological problems related to combat, women are more often victims of sexual violence. In 2010 a report on harmful traditional practices in Afghanistan was published (UNAMA & OHCHR, 2010). The harmful practices included several key points that were harmful to women, for example forced marriage, forced isolation or honor crimes including *zina*, which is sexual intercourse outside of marriage and can be used against victims of rape (UNAMA & OHCHR, 2010). The report was supposed to be a tool in the implementation of the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) in Afghanistan and uncovered that the harmful practices were occurring in varying degrees in all communities of Afghanistan. Women being subject of sexual violence is a continuous issue throughout the war. Based on the key points made by the report on harmful practices, several types of sexual violence are being highlighted. What is not stated as obvious in the report is the issue of trafficking. The Taliban resurgence needed a financial foundation to continue their growth. The main sources of income for Taliban were the production of narcotics and trafficking (Laub, 2014). Victims of trafficking were not limited to one gender, however, the safety shelters for the victims are. Men who are victims of trafficking have a harder time speaking about it and reporting it, and they experience an exclusion in the safety shelters as they often are open exclusively for women and girls (Akhtar, 2019). In cases where men are victims of trafficking, the social norms rooted in the Afghan society are giving the victims little to no possibility to speak of it, which in turn is affecting the statistics on trafficking victims (Akhtar, 2019). The social consequences for male victims of sexual violence in general are massive. The masculinity related to men is so important for Afghan men that their risk being excluded from their community if they speak of their traumas related to trafficking and sexual violence in general (Hoang, 2022). Men suffer larger social consequences of trafficking, however, women and girls are more vulnerable to becoming victims of trafficking in the first place (Akhtar, 2019). In context of the report on harmful practices, it is easy to argue that women are more vulnerable to be victims of sexualized crimes. However, the issue for men can also be argued to be an important gender issue as the EVAW is implemented in the government, while men's rights and access to health care after sexualized violence is not addressed as broadly.

The US was heavily involved in the war and in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, and when President Trump was elected in the US it reflected on the negotiations for peace talks with the Taliban. Former US presidents had been addressing women's rights in their speeches, Trump did not. He also cancelled the peace talks, and received threats from Taliban that their attacks

would injure more civilians as the negotiations stopped (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). President Ghani, on the other hand, wished to continue the process on negotiation for peace, and stood on the demands that women's right should be an area of focus for Afghanistan (Tolo News, 2020). After years of setting up legal and social foundations for women's rights to be addressed and improved in the country, the years to come would be extremely important for Afghan women.

A report written by Martine van Bijlert published by the Afghanistan Analysts Network states that women in Afghanistan might disagree on what has brought the most suffering in their daily lives during the war. The interviewees referenced in the report mention US airstrikes, Taliban's regime, violence, and instability as well as their limited possibilities to move freely and the economic difficulties their families experience (van Bijlert, 2021). Some of the women also brought up their hopes that the future would bring more possibilities for education and investment for better income (van Bijlert, 2021). In relation to education and working life in context of US involvement some of them said that they feared that their income would be threatened by a Taliban takeover if the Sharia laws were reenacted, and they no longer would be allowed to go to the fields and work. The report was published in July 2021, which is just a few weeks before the Taliban's second takeover and the massive evacuations of international workers and soldiers, that resulted in massive chaos on airports and cities in Afghanistan (Raake & Venberget, 2021).

In 2021 Taliban seized power after international forces had to evacuate, shortly after the evacuations they declared Afghanistan an Islamic state (NRK, 2021). A documentary released in 2022 interviewed women who had been living better lives while international forces were present (Shah, 2022). The Ministry of Women's Affairs were shut down and the spokesperson interviewed in the documentary claimed this was rooted in the beliefs that one gender should not be given more institutional structures to promote their rights than the other gender (Shah, 2022). The progress for gender issues had come a long way during the war, but were brutally torn down when Taliban in 2021 showed the world the power they had on Afghanistan.

### ***1.3 Research question***

Afghanistan as a case for examining gender issues raises a wide range of issues. With the many attempts of invasions, the patriarchal norms and laws, and the extremist Islamic presence in the country, the 2001 Afghan war makes a good case in examining gender issues in a complex war.

The war on terror raises several issues in context of gender issues. The war represents a direct impact on gender issues through for example recruitment for military forces for men and the risk of sexual violence for women. The extreme Islamic laws through Sharia in the country raise issues of human rights, especially for women when they were restricted most rights like education, access to health care and the freedom of movement. The international interference due to the war on terror raises issues of the west vs. east binaries in context of women's rights.

There are many factors which can influence gender issues, and the situation on gender issues in Afghanistan is complex. There are several smaller and bigger gender issues that could have been established before the outbreak of the war, and there are gender issues which could have evolved due to the war. As such, this thesis will address the following research question: *What were the main gender issues regarding the war in Afghanistan?*

Because gender issues seems to be implemented in the norms and formal structures of Afghanistan, leading to structures that target gender differently, this thesis is using the postcolonial feminist approach in order to find what the main gender issues regarding the war in Afghanistan were. The theoretical approach gives an opportunity to examine the gender issues from different angles. The thesis is presenting gender issues that are systematically differentiating men and women in the war, and is also including an international dimension and gender issues prior to the outbreak of the war as well as gender issues in combat. All of which includes different structural challenges for gender issues.

#### **1.4 Goal of research**

As long as I can remember women's rights in Afghanistan have been addressed on the news and in books I have read, like Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which I during high school wrote about in an assignment. Women's rights have always interested me, and Afghanistan is a country I find very interesting with its culture and history of conflicts which later gave it the nickname "the graveyard of empires". When I during my time as a student of international relations learned about war and conflicts, and the policy processes which affected them, it made me curious about the effects of war on gender issues. I found that I wanted to learn more about the effects of the 2001 Afghan war on gender issues, because I knew there had been issues already prior to the war. Through the Taliban, the international interference and responses, and the changes in gender balance in combat, the war had several important angles for me to examine in regard of gender issues. The most interesting part is the war itself, but as

I will highlight several times in the thesis, the war in context of gender issues cannot be analyzed without the other factors like background, international dimension or gender issues in combat.

Through a feminist point of view this thesis will confront the main gender issues regarding the war in Afghanistan. Many countries and international organizations have been involved in the war that started in the fall of 2001. All of which have made its own impacts on the civilians in Afghanistan, in one way or another. Many decisions have been made throughout the years and the ripple effects have affected men and women differently, often in a negative way. This is the difference which this thesis is confronting. Women's rights in Afghanistan have been addressed from the very beginning of the war. The feminist framework allows the thesis to look further into the women's rights-aspect of the war. Feminism's goal is to seek out structures and norms that affect inequality based on gender, and the goal is to uncover some of the main gender issues in Afghanistan from 2001 until 2021. The timeframe is decided to analyze the period of the war first engaged by the US through the war on terror.

Through this thesis I hope to find how the war has affected women, and men, in the war and give an academic understanding to how these gender issues have arisen in this period of time. This, I hope, will be valuable in future involvement in wars where all civilians should, as far as possible, be protected from the effects of war in order to rebuild a peaceful nation. Only by uncovering inequality can one make changes in structures and strategies to protect civilians in the best way possible. The thesis will not be arguing that women should be shielded from all the effects of war as this is impossible during violent conflicts in a country. The point of analyzing gender issues regarding the war in Afghanistan is to find the weaknesses in political structures which are built during the war, and because of the war, that target genders differently. This is due to the now known fact that women are a great resource for both economic growth, political development and peacebuilding. All of which are important factors for the country's prospects of finding a peaceful resolution to the war and rebuilding the nation afterwards.

Other than the topic being interesting, it is extremely important. The war on terror is not yet over, and the Taliban regime is reenacted in Afghanistan as of the fall 2021 (The UN Association, 2022). In order for the war on terror and defeating the Taliban, both women and men should be seen as a resource for the peacebuilding processes and for the economic growth and continued peace post-war. In addition, the new takeover by the Taliban has once again changed the gender issues drastically, and the progress that may have been done during the

twenty years of war from 2001-2021 is the foundation of which one should continue to work with in order to win over the extremist group which now holds power over Afghanistan again.

The goal is therefore to find the main gender issues, with the hopes that a political plan to bring peace to Afghanistan is built on the feminist ideas of involving both gender in the policy making. Through this involvement of men and women and by confronting the structures that are set to disproportionately distribute burdens and benefits, I believe that economic growth and peace can be within reach for Afghanistan. Without it, the country is only using about half of its population in the work on building peaceful and democratic societies.

### ***1.5 Review of literature***

The literature under investigation is mainly composed of reports from international organizations and academic articles, as well as media coverage on the issue. Through the twenty-one years of war since the invasion from the US, a lot has been published regarding the war. The war itself, the political disagreements and decisions, women's rights and other issues regarding the war has been subject of academic research and media topics. The jungle of information is therefore large. Reports from international organizations come out regularly, the same goes for information through the media. This makes it possible to find both old and new published articles on the war and the issues related to the war.

The literature gives information on the war, which is either with a feminist perspective or is given feminist perspective during analysis. By taking on different forms of literature the thesis will also have data from different sources with its one perspective on the issue. International organizations like the UN, UNAMA, Amnesty International, and UNICEF are often referenced in the thesis through their reports on gender issues, Afghan political development and effects of violent conflicts and war. The reports often have a feminist approach to it, and often a women-oriented approach through feminism. The reports will therefore be relevant to the thesis as the reports often show the gender issues in their reports. An example of a rapport from UNAMA is the report on *Harmful Traditional Practices and Implementation of the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women in Afghanistan*, which was published December 2010. The harmful practices included are, amongst others: forced marriages, honor killings, and child marriage. The report has been references in the thesis several times, and highlight some of the cultural traditions that is harmful. The report is used to highlight that the religious laws which for example the Taliban are associated with is not, in fact, rooted in the Islamic beliefs of the

Quran. Cultural practices can change and develop with society, and is therefore important to differentiate on cultural and religious practices like the report did. As the report does not only highlight the harmful practices, but also includes the implementation of the law on elimination of violence against women (EVAW), the report is exclusively women-oriented with the intention of implementing the legislative foundations for a more gender friendly Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan Analyst Network`s reports have also been used a lot in the thesis. The analyst network gives reports on issues regarding Afghanistan, and the thesis have used some of the reports that highlight the gender issues. Martine van Bijlert published an article in 2021 which included interviews of Afghan women. The report argues that women were not listened to in the peace negotiations, and even “*that women’s rights and basic freedoms, though important, may need to be the price paid for achieving peace and ending the hardships of war*” (van Bijlert, 2021, p. 3). Through the interviews the situation for women in Afghanistan is first presented with hopes for the US-Taliban peace talks. The women who are interviewed have hopes for their community to become peaceful and give them the opportunity to make a living and having less anxiety through reduced fighting in their communities. The second round of interviews present women with less hope. The peace talks had been giving them room to breathe and nights without waking up to the sound of fighting, however this seemed to be temporary, and as other literatures reference, the peace and progresses made during the war is vulnerable and can fall any minute. The women said that the life in their community had shifted several times, and in April 2021 some of the women reported that the Taliban were back and the fighting started again as the Taliban were shooting at government security posts. Through the interviews van Bijlert present a picture of women whose only hope is for peace to settle, and women activist who work to contribute to peace and women`s rights while facing resistance which makes the work more difficult.

The literature in the thesis were gathered from different sources and raised different aspects of gender issues regarding the war which give an opportunity to present a broad understanding of the theoretical framework and the analytical part of the thesis. The list of literature is long, but what all the literature have in common is that they present an issue of the war in Afghanistan which can be linked to gender issues or a specific link to gender issues in the war. Sima Samar (2019) for example writes in *Feminism, Peace and Afghanistan* (Samar, 2019) about the exclusion of women from Afghan social, political, and economic arenas. Sheela Reddy also contributes to highlight the social, political, and economic arenas, and is also referencing the



portion of women who were forbidden to work during Taliban (Reddy, 2014). Her paper represented literature which also highlight the difficulties related to health care, education and the legal protection of women. Both Reddy (2014) and Samar (2019) highlight the structures which differentiate gender where women are the carrier of the burdens which the structures represent.

The literature used in the thesis has often a women oriented point of view, the literature on which gender issues that are affecting men is limited. Buvinic, Das Gupta, Casabonne and Verwimp present a literature which is highlighting gender inequality in violent conflicts. They mentioned some gender issues which in most cases are affecting men: the number of mortality. Men are recruited for military service and is therefore put at risk in combat (Buvinic, Das Gupta, Casabonne, & Verwimp, 2012). This report, however, is one of the few which also present gender issues affecting men, and seen in context of the interview conducted by Ross-Sheriff (2006) even the gender inequality affecting men in violent conflicts can affect women. The women interviewed were forced to split their family up in order to keep them safe, and therefore lost the little they had of safety structures around them (Ross-Sheriff, 2006). There should be more about the war's effects on men, but much of literature found has little to nothing on the subject. However, some have been addressing men's experiences directly. Hoang (2022) underlines the difficulties men experience after being victims of trafficking (Hoang, 2022). The social norms and structures in Afghanistan makes it more difficult to be a male victim, rather than a female victim. Because of the gendered assumptions men and women are judged by, by the society, women have more easy access to help after the assault (Hoang, 2022).

The gendered assumptions are presented in several sources of literature. Cockburn (2013) and Solhjell (2015) are amongst these. Where Cockburn (2013) underlines the fact that women and men are experiencing life by their genders, Solhjell is more concerned about the overall essentialist approach on women, where it is in women's nature to be exposed to sexual violence for example (Solhjell, 2015). Cockburn claims that even though men and women interact in the same activities, they are doing so as a man or as a woman. This overlaps with Hoang's (2022) claims that it is more difficult for men to get access to help after being victims of trafficking. Because women are raped or trafficked as a woman, men are being victims of the same thing *as* a man, where the goal is to downgrade men to be less masculine, and more feminine. The gendered assumptions presented by both Solhjell, Cockburn and Hoang is following the analysis and is often understood in the same way by other authors of literature used in the thesis.

Examples of literature which targets the Taliban and/or the Sharia laws directly have often times taken on a feminist, and more of a women-oriented point of view in their articles. Dobbins and Malkasian (2015) and Laub (2014) is writing about the Taliban negotiations and the Taliban resurgence. Both of which have an impact on gender issues in Afghanistan, and happening parallel to one another. Dobbins and Malkasian highlights the process and progress of the Taliban peace talks, while Laub describes the resurgence of the Taliban happening at the same time as the process of peace talks. The resurgence of the Taliban is happening with the help of production of narcotics and human trafficking (Laub, 2014) and the hopes for peace talks is to stop the illegal activities of Taliban that is giving reason for international interference, like revoking women's rights or giving areas for terrorist organizations to train

The literature is giving information on all the parts of the war that this thesis is trying to cover. From the Taliban to the international dimension and the effects of the war in Afghanistan. Most of the literature have a feminist approach, but some does not. However, they are all contributing to underline different important factors of the 2001 Afghan war.

### ***1.6 The structure of the thesis***

The thesis is sectioned in five chapters, with the intend of making it as easy as possible for the reader to follow the thesis and the discussion. The chapters are all related to each other.

Chapter 1 is the introduction of the topic and the presentation of the research question. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of the thesis which is postcolonial feminism. It is a critical theory which is targeting the structures of society which target genders differently, and brings up the continued effects of colonialism.

Chapter 3 explains which methodology is used in the thesis and why. The thesis has adopted a feminist methodology with some help from literature studies. Meaning that the literature is found with the methods of literature studies which represent a method of searching for literature. The feminist methodology is the method used to analyze and capture the experiences of women and other marginalized groups.

Chapter 4, which is the main part of the thesis, is the analytical part. This is where the analysis of the research question is presented, understood from the theoretical framework and the chosen methodology. The chapter is divided in five sub-chapters which include a short presentation of

the historical background prior to the 2001 Afghan war, gender issues the five years prior to the outbreak of the war where the main focus is Afghanistan during the Taliban regime, the international dimensions on gender issues regarding the war, gender issues in the 2001 Afghan war, and gender issues in combat. The main part is concentrated on the gender issues throughout the war from 2001 until 2021. The chapter is divided in the sub-chapters with the intention of giving a broad understanding to why gender issues are in the position they are and how the history and war has changed them throughout the war. While the thesis is focusing on gender issues in the 2001 Afghan war, it cannot be understood totally without the reflections on history, Taliban's regime, the international level of analysis or the combat dimension as they all play a part in the development of gender issues in the war.

Chapter 5, which is the last chapter, consists of the conclusion. It includes a brief summary of the thesis and research question. It also includes a presentation of what my analysis found.

## **2 Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of this thesis is post-colonial feminism. In this chapter I will introduce feminism more broadly and this sub-branch more specifically. In addition, I will provide examples of issues where feminism is the preferred theory in explaining phenomenon in international politics as well as why I chose post-colonial feminism as my theoretical approach when examining gender issues in the war in Afghanistan.

Feminist approaches are often taking a women-oriented point of view. This might have to do with the historical positions of women where they were given less opportunities and rights for centuries. As early as in 1792 an early feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft, published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* where she argued that equal education for both men and women would benefit society. She wrote that women through their mothers were taught to be obedient, had little knowledge of human weaknesses, softness of temperament and scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety. If a woman learned this, and if she were also beautiful, she would have all that she needed for at least twenty years as she would receive protection from a man (Wollestonecraft, 1792). In other words: women as early as in the 1790's were not allowed education and were seen as almost a property to the male gender. Their faith lied in their beauty and their ability to be obedient and have an almost childish form of decency. Even the numbers from 2021 show that girls are more likely to be out of school than boys at the same age. In areas

of conflicts girls are more than twice as likely to be out of school (UNICEF, n.d.). The female gender is also the one giving birth and therefore having other prospects of health issues during a life time, in addition to gender norms which often bring women to have the majority of the custody for children in addition to having lower-income jobs and less economic stability than men (Holst, 2017). All of this are elements which will lead to significant differences in the life prospects of males and females. In IR studies these inequalities between genders, which are common on a day-to-day basis, will reveal themselves in a much more systematic way. A male-oriented feminist approach is rather rare in comparison to women-oriented, but it does not mean that these issues cannot be addressed under feminism. This should not be forgotten, even though most feminist theory approaches highlight the gender in which the theory is build up on.

## **2.1 *Feminism***

Feminism entered the studies of IR as a theoretical approach around the late 1980s (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016). It is also widely discussed as a way to label people. Many can agree on the basic principles of feminism such as gender equality, but not willingly label themselves as feminists. To understand feminism and its place in people's lives and in international politics, we have to define what feminism is as well as the various branches of feminism. Cathrine Holst highlights the challenges of giving a clear and too concrete definition of feminism (Holst, 2017). Because of the different approaches and their set of values which differ from one another, people often fear being wrongly "accused" of having a different point of view or values than what they might have. In addition, the gender-oriented view that the feminist theory presents is often more women-oriented rather than *gender*-oriented where both men and women are represented. Feminists are often against oppression of women and are working for women's representation in the public sphere, and in this feminism is more women-oriented than gender-oriented, despite the fact that gender inequality is also affecting men (Holst, 2017).

Feminism as a political movement originated from liberal principals of justice and equality (Østerud, 2017). The triggering cause of the movement was the demand for women's rights to vote, and the first wave of feminism came in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In England the movement appeared because of the thought of equality for all, and in the US the demands for women's right to vote were seen in context with ending slavery. When freeing slaves, the thought of equal rights between genders emerged (Østerud, 2017). In the years to come feminism developed into a critical theory with different sub-categories with individual goals (Lønnå, 2021). While some feminists continued the work towards women's rights to vote,

others saw the movement in context of other issues in society as well, such as the socialist organization of women's movement which took on the liberation of the working class as a whole, including women (Lønnå, 2021). During the 1970s a new wave came. The feminist movement had been able to provide more equality for women, although some thought the political and legal rights of women were invisible and meant nothing as long as the patriarchy was so strongly integrated in society (Østerud, 2017). Both women and men had the right to vote and participate more equally in society, but inequality was still a fact in the privacy of people's homes and in other parts of society like in working life. The new goal was to get women into the labor force, uncover violence and rape against women, in addition to minimize entertainment, which was considered discriminating towards women, for example sexualized entertainment at the expense of women (Østerud, 2017). Feminism here is in all similarities to the first explanation, a theory which is describing and criticizing both social norms and interaction, and the society's organizing structure. Its main focus is to make women equal to men, and women are the main priority of the theory. According to this view male dominated societies are a threat to for example democratic processes and utilization of labor (Østerud, 2017).

Feminism in international relations (IR) is quite similar to Østerud's definition. IR feminists are focused on the basic inequalities between women and men, like the gender hierarchy (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016). In this approach feminism's inspiration from post-structuralism is important. The way they see it the conventional IR scholar approach in the study of politics is gendered thinking, and more specific maleness. In security studies for example, the realist understanding of security is based on military defense, which is considered masculine thinking (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016). Viewing the international system as being anarchical conceals the gender hierarchy in world politics which already exists (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016). In armed conflicts women are often viewed as protected since they do not inhabit an active role in the conflict. Despite this, women are not secure during conflicts, and instead they are victims of gendered violence. The main point of how feminism is viewed in context of IR and post-structuralism is that gender plays a crucial role in international politics and economics, but because this is hidden behind private relationships between men and women, there has to be a change in the way policy makers are thinking and how they perceive their truths (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016).

In the past three decades a shift in feminist international relations theory has come to sight. Through the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 from 2000, gender-based perceptions of violent conflicts were addressed. Since then, eight UN Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security have been released (Regjeringen.no, 2019). The importance of gender-based perspective in security politics has shown itself important, especially through the multiple resolutions the UN Security Council has released. Although, some find the resolutions and the work on feminism in IR not sufficient enough and find the resolution 1325 to be too essentialist and male dominated (Solhjell, 2015). The resolution does, in short, highlight the importance that all states, especially the ones contributing and participate in armed and humanitarian conflicts, keep in mind that women and children are victims in war and should be protected (United Nations Security Council, 2000). According to Solhjell (2015), instead of challenging the masculinity in institutions and society to make a change and make the genders more equal or better understood in the context of IR, the gender discourses have an essentialist approach to it. By generalizing men and women like this, Solhjell notes that it is indirectly said here that it is in women's nature to be exposed to sexual violence at all times. In Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, one of the sections says: "*Calls on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict;*" (United Nations Security Council, 2000, p. 3). Sexual violence in armed conflicts is a rather big problem and should be addressed, but Solhjell's point of the essentialist approach to gender and feminism in the structures of the international policy is clear in this example. The extract from Resolution 1325 underlines this: women and girls should be protected, men are the protectors, very similar to what Mary Wollstonecraft wrote in 1792. The understanding of sex and gender in IR is highly important and can be used as a disadvantage and as a favorable tool in IR. Policy makers who understand the gender norms can use them as a tool for imperialism, and legitimize war on behalf on the "lesser" gender which is in need of protection (Mohanty, Pratt, & Riley, 2009).

There are several approaches within the broader feminist framework. Whitworth (2018) gives a few examples of feminist approaches: (a) Liberal feminists focus on women's representation within the public sphere and strive for women's representation in all decision-making institutions, and seek answers as to why there is not enough women's representation or why there is enough; (b) Radical feminists focus on the patriarchy and wishes to change the organized support that gives men power over women. In addition to this, radical feminists are

much more concerned with the differences between men and women in both a biological perspective and in social perspectives; (c) Feminist critical theory focuses on prevailing assumptions about both men and women and asks what it means to have feminine and masculine behavior and the appropriate roles for them in society; (d) Feminist postmodernists draw the focus on deconstructing universal truths and “the taken for granted” assumptions, such as the thought that women should be the care taker in every household, and understandings of gender is what makes us different and have different possibilities and expectations; (e) Postcolonial feminist theories take the assumed truths of gender one step further than postmodernist feminists. They try to unpack the assumptions further and are eager to crush these assumptions enough so that the structure in which we discriminate men and women fade away (Whitworth, 2018).

This thesis is primarily focused on the gender issues regarding the war in Afghanistan from 2001 until 2021. In that sense it seems like the most natural approach of feminism in the thesis is postcolonial feminism. This approach targets the structures that target gender differently which is what is interesting in the US-lead war on Afghan soil (Whitworth, 2018). Postcolonial feminism grew from the postcolonial theory, where both theories are based off a reaction towards the nation-building colonialism (Al-Wazedi, 2021). The critical theory which postcolonial feminism is, addresses inequalities in relation to hegemonic power-relations, which includes a West vs. East binaries and cultural hierarchies in relation to women specifically (Al-Wazedi, 2021). In this case, the theory is used to understand the structures of the war that target the genders differently like education, military duties, or prospects of having a stable income through work.

Colonialism gives an understanding of “us” and “them” where the understanding is taken from colonized people being viewed as less important than the emperors (Forslund, 2021). This is a result of the assumption that colonialism continue to influence political ideologies and socioeconomic structures (Hu, 2019). In postcolonial feminism the distinction between “us” and “them” are between men and women. In this thesis the distinction is men and women, and the thesis will not focus on the other genders which people may identify themselves with. By separating genders in policy development, it may increase the structures which target genders differently. These are the structures that postcolonial feminism addresses, often in relation to the women-oriented point of view within feminism. The structures, however could be understood as a strength or a burden for gender issues.

Feminism, as mentioned above, is not just something that we label people with. It is also a way of seeing the structures and the organizing of society. Because our gender gives us an identity, we also identify others by their gender. As postmodern and postcolonial feminism highlights, the gender norms are what organizes us as humans in politics (Whitworth, 2018). In security policy (which often is a large part of a country's foreign policy) this is exemplified by how conflicts and its repercussions affect the genders differently. Kennedy and Dingli (2019) have noted some important aspects of gender (and sex) in relation to security studies. The importance of gender and gender roles is actively shown in the crossfires of wars: while men in large are expected to be patriots and fight in the name of their country, women are in large expected to take care of the household, be a good mother and other typical feminine activities (Kennedy & Dingli, 2019). Feminine activities are often related to caregiving and other tasks related to emotions and softness. Masculine activities, on the other hand, relate to being in power and being a member of combat forces. These gender roles exemplify themselves especially during war. "The war on terror" exemplified the gender roles in some of the actions taken during combat. Not only is it a point to underline the importance of male power in some regions, but it is also interesting to see how some of the traditional gender roles were used to their advantage. During the war in Afghanistan the wife of an Al-Qaeda-leader spoke to other women in hopes of them volunteering to take part in the armed conflict through the use suicide bombs. This gave the bombings an element of surprise which the foreign forces and national contributes did not anticipate because of the patriarchic structure of the culture and society (Kennedy & Dingli, 2019). Although war and conflicts are rather special for security policy, the gender norms/roles play a large part in both the national and foreign policy of many states.

## ***2.2 Theory selection***

If we were to examine the war itself several theories could have been used. One being Realist theory which can explain how the US had to take measures when they were attacked on 9/11/01, and therefore the triggering cause of the war. This is done through the thought of an anarchic structure of the world, which forces every country to defend itself from other countries (Østerud, 2017). Realism is a good theory when doing research on the basics of war and the triggering cause of wars. In this case the area of research is gender issues regarding war, which realism does not give a good base for analysis on.



Liberal theory could explain why the West, with NATO and/or US, is trying to maintain its role as kind of a superpower in the world in order to avoid “the war of all against all” in the international relations (Whitworth, 2018). Liberal theory is seeking a world regulated by law. The theory presupposes that all states to have a republic government, as well as being liberal states. Through liberal states peace will be achieved as the idea of liberal theory is that no liberal states will engage in war against other liberal states where the states are regulated through the same laws (Whitworth, 2018).

Constructivism could have been a theoretical approach which to some extent would highlight the issues the thesis is analyzing. Constructivism is a theory based on the thought that policy is made through social norms and interactions (Østerud, 2017). Security policy in constructivism is understood as protection of a value of a group, for example the value of women and the importance of protecting them in order to preserve the value they have for a country. This theory can set a base for an analysis on gender issues and how it might be challenging to practice politics which target genders differently. However, the theory is not precise enough to capture only the gender aspect of war.

This thesis however is taking a feminist point of view in order to further analyze the gender issues in the war in Afghanistan. This is done in hopes that the theory can reveal how the different genders are affected and how a gender-perspective can have an impact on global conflicts like the conflict in Afghanistan, as it would be logical to think that at least some of the findings in this thesis can be relevant in other conflicts as well. As mentioned earlier, feminism can have an approach which leans more into the social aspects of policymaking. In IR this will come to show in the social constructs and norms that both statesmen and civilians live by. That is also the reason why I chose postcolonial feminism as my subbranch of feminism for the thesis. The postcolonial feminist perspective will target the structures of the war that creates inequality in war. It also reflects on the continued effects that colonialism have on socioeconomic structures. Therefore, the theory builds a base for analysis that can give a good understanding of the situation for the different genders in the war in Afghanistan.

### **3 Methodology**

The goal of the research is to identify the main gender issues regarding the war in Afghanistan. To do so, the thesis employs feminism, more specific postcolonial feminism as its theoretical

framework. Through the feminist baseline the events during the Afghan war can be seen in context of gender issues. The timeline is limited to the years of the war on terror, which is 2001 until 2021, but I have also included some background information from earlier periods as these are relevant to understand what the starting point of gender issues were in the war. I have used a feminist methodology to analyze literature and some elements from literature studies to gather relevant literature. Both methodologies were used parallel to one another and have affected which sources I have chosen to use in the thesis.

Feminist methodology is an approach to research developed to address the limitations of traditional methodology with regards to capturing the experiences of women and other marginalized groups. Such methodology includes a wide range of methods, approaches, and research strategies in order to accurately capture the feminist research questions (Naples, 2007). The postcolonial feminists gave the feminist methodology a better understanding of feminism knowledge, as it brought in not just marginalized women, but also included other marginalized groups (Peake, 2007). In 1986 Judith A. Cook and Mary Margaret Fonow presented two types of literature in feminist methodology. The first analyses the epistemological assumptions that set the foundation for different ways of understanding women's experiences. The second being empirical research on gender inequality which incorporates the feminist assumptions in the techniques and strategies to gather and analyze data (Cook & Fonow, 1986). This thesis is using the second type of literature. The literature used in the thesis is often gathered from the databases of international organizations like the UN, UNICEF, and Amnesty International, or more national databases like the US Council on Foreign Relations or the Afghanistan Analyst Network. In addition to this I have used the university's access to different databases which offer a great amount of academic articles on the subject. The most used database I have used is JSTOR. Speeches and news articles are often gathered from NRK, VG, the Washington Post or CNN. In other words, the empirical findings in the gathered literature which capture the assumptions of feminism, and more specific postcolonial feminism, is used in order to create an overview of the main gender issues in the war in Afghanistan.

After finding relevant literature, I have tried to identify different explanations to how gender issues were affected during the chosen timeframe of the thesis. War challenges gender issues in general, which I will come back to later in the thesis. The literature on these challenges and changes in gender issues have more often than the literature on historic events included a gender perspective. And as the feminist methodology, they have often been from a perspective of

women's issues (Stanley & Wise, 2013). Literature used in this part of the analysis was often from nonprofit organizations such as Amnesty International or from international organizations like the UN. Both of which have some degree of political background, which is important to remember when doing an analysis based on a feminist theory and through a feminist methodology. International organizations often publish or produce articles for a specific purpose, and this can affect the angle on the literature found in their databases. For example is Amnesty International working on giving political focus and action on human rights violations, and their articles is therefore often angled to find the story which will capture the reader to want action on improving the situation described by the organization. Some of the critiques on feminist methodology have been on the early feminist research work where there was an underlying assumption that the research was conducted on women, for women and by other women (Peake, 2007). The sources are often women-oriented and paint a picture of a world almost unbearable for women. Whether this picture is true or not is however verified by other sources; for example can a report from Amnesty International be seen in context of a report from the Afghanistan Analysts Network, and their findings can be compared to each other to verify if the situation described were the reality.

The methodology gives me the opportunity to find data dated from before and during the war. Many of which can give an image on how the situation on gender issues were at the time of writing. The researcher's own thoughts on the topic can easily be reflected in how one have been prioritizing and which databases were used for sources. The methodology chosen for the thesis is a great tool for finding answers to the research question if I, as a researcher, are able to use it correctly. In feminist methodology some of the critics have been on separating men and women in research and how to use this to get a real picture of the situation (Stanley & Wise, 2013). Similar to the feminist literature theory, the feminist methodology is separating men and women in the literature (Skei, 2021). The core key of doing research with a feminist approach is to separate the genders and analyze things from a gender point of view. The literature can be analyzing or drawing focus on whatever issue, but the feminist methodology will analyze without ignoring the genders and the symmetry or asymmetry on the issue in question (Skei, 2021).

To gather literature for this thesis, I have been using the strategies from literature studies. This is a qualitative method which can be used to analyze new events as well as older historic events with the use of internet. Through literature studies internet has made it possible for researchers

to have easy access to previous work from other researchers. It has also made it possible for new ways of doing research where the research can be on the internet on different forums or on different digital communities. Internet can also be subject of research where researchers research internet as a way of being (Tjora, 2020). This thesis is using internet as a tool to find information on the chosen topic. This method allows the researcher to find useful information from academic articles, articles published by the media and stories from real time witnesses through published information on the internet (Tjora, 2020). Through years with the expansion of the use of internet, and the timeframe subject for analyses, the volume of information on the topic of the thesis is considered large enough to give a base for analysis.

In comparison to other methods such as interviews or observation, this will be a less intrusive and time-consuming method of research. By the use of already published data the researcher can compare, analyze and find answers to the research question without much involvement from other people. Even though the use of internet in today's society is extreme, there are ways to fail using the internet in literature studies. Justus Randolph points out that the easiest way to derail a thesis with this kind of method is when the researcher does not fully understand the literature in question (Randolph, 2009). In other words, the researcher must know where the literature is from, what the publisher's intentions were, what it means and how this is giving valuable information to the research question. If the researcher is not careful enough with these considerations the thesis might be useless and give the wrong impressions of the topic in question. The considerations that have to be made in order to give a trustworthy and real production of data in literature studies goes beyond the internet. Also, other forms of documents, articles, dairies or reuse of old interview- and observation data can be used in this method of research (Tjora, 2020). The methodology will always presuppose that the researcher can prioritize and find data which gives trustworthy information and answers the research question in a way that is not contaminated by the researchers interests or standpoint in the topic.

As this thesis is using literature studies with a broad use of internet to find relevant articles, interviews, and reports, I have been very careful when typing in my search words. A lot of time has gone to sorting out what is relevant and/or trustworthy and what is not. The main search words used have been for example "gender issues", "Afghanistan", "women", "war", "feminism", "combat", "Taliban", "9/11" or other search words which would give me results which said something on topic I am writing about. Names of relevant persons or specific institutions or reports I was looking for were also used to find relevant information. Through

the databases the university had access to I found many relevant articles that presented the topic I was writing about. The articles that could be relevant, but did not include my search words have not been taken in the analysis. This is one of the weaknesses of the literature study through internet. One can easily miss some relevant information if one does not search broadly enough or use the correct search words.

I find some of the writings from media and/or organizations which is not as trustworthy as an academic article very valuable and useful in the thesis. When deciding whether a source is trustworthy or not, I have taken a closer look at the key points presented by Randolph (2009) to understand the literature in question. Tjora (2020) points out the importance of language and that what is said often enough becomes truths (Tjora, 2020). This is why I find it useful to sometimes use quotes from different persons or published (informal) data in order to see how the gender issues have developed (in negative or positive ways) throughout the conflict. Media coverage mirror how the focus in society on gender issues have been through the war. Through interviews they can also give an impression and stories from real time witnesses in the area. This is valuable information when analyzing gender issues in Afghanistan from 2001-2021. Investigative journalism contributes to tell the stories of who lived through the historical events and is a good supplement to the academic articles and reports which often gives a more general picture of how the war affect people. The Norwegian National Broadcasting (NRK) and VG is used to find media coverage on the topic. This is due to their coverage of the topic throughout the years and the access to reader posts from professionals and journalists investigating the topics. Al Jazeera is an independent news organization according to themselves (Al Jazeera, n.d.). The news organization is often referenced in the Norwegian news organizations like NRK and VG. Al Jazeera is funded in the Qatari government (Al Jazeera, n.d.), and due to the close location to Afghanistan the news organization is used to find media coverage on the topic in an historical context. In addition to the mentioned news organization the thesis also includes references from CNN and the Washington Post. These contributed to the US media coverage, which is highly relevant as the US is one of the main actors in the 2001 Afghan war.

I have been using the literature available to find important events and happenings in the war in Afghanistan. To find these I have used different sources which have described what has happened throughout the years in research. These descriptions have mostly been without the feminist approach from the author, but rather just a simple explanation to what happened. The literature used here is often from the US government. As US was one of the main contributors

to the war and has played a severely influential role in the war, the US website for the Council on Foreign Relations has been one of the most used sources of literature. The website gave a whole historical timeline which has been used to capture the relevant events in the war regarding gender issues. The timeline does not include a gender perspective, but it does highlight the important changes in the war from a US perspective and important events in the political development of the Afghan government where the US contributed. The events gathered from the timeline were put in context with gender issues through reports from the other sources used in the thesis. The US Council of Foreign Affairs is also offering a database of literature which highlight some issues regarding political development and the war, which have also been used in context of the theoretical framework and other sources.

After finding the needed literature for both understanding the war and the last years before the outbreak of the war in 2001, the final process for research was to sift the collected literature through the chosen theory which is the postcolonial branch of feminism. All collected literature are seen, understood and analyzed through the assumptions of postcolonial feminism.

By using techniques and methods from both a literature study and from feminist methodology, I have been able to find and sort out the literature that is relevant and that says something about the gender issues the civilians in Afghanistan have been facing. The literature study gave the baseline for how I found literature. By adding the feminist methodology after finding my sources of chosen literature I have been able to find literature which is giving a relevant piece of information and after that been using the feminist methodology in order to separate how men and women most likely experience the events during the war. For example the article of Sima Samir which points out the feminist issues in the Afghan war have been analyzed with focus on the structural foundations which target genders differently, as this is one of the main ideas of the postcolonial feminism.

As the critique of the feminist methodology points out; feminist methodology can become personal. As Peake underlined, there have often been political motivations behind the research of this sort earlier. I am in the risk of falling in under this category as I too am a woman who experience the world from a woman's point of view. For all researchers it can be difficult to stay objective to the issues in question of research. However, I have tried to bring both male and female perspectives into the analysis by choosing literature from both male and female researchers. I have also tried bringing both point of views in the analysis and move away from

the traditional feminist approach of being women-oriented. I find this aspect of the analysis to be a strength as it can give a deeper understanding of how war affects people. The feminist methodology of separating genders in analysis gave me that option. At the same time, since the feminist theory and the feminist methodology are mostly women-oriented it is a weakness of the method whereas it will give a better understanding and a deeper analysis on the women-oriented parts compared to the man-oriented ones.

Another weakness of the method and the analysis as a whole is the fact that other genders have not been taken into analysis. The LGBTQ+ community would probably find this as a great weakness. The decision of not including these other genders have been made due to the traditional culture and the rigid rules that Afghans lived under during the war. Both of which most likely have been making the use of other gender terms impossible and therefore not a topic of research which would have given enough literature. Genders in this thesis are understood as the two sexes but are however referred to as genders. Although the decision is made due to this, it has to be brought up that this will limit the understanding of all gender issues as the people who are identifying as other genders than the two sexes do not get a place in the analysis of the gender issues regarding the war in Afghanistan.

#### **4 Analysis**

In this chapter I will present and analyze the empirical findings on gender issues with regards to the war in Afghanistan. The chapter introduces important political events, gender issues raised due to the war and structural changes regarding gender issues. The analysis starts off with background information on Afghan gender issues related to previous important political events and Taliban`s interference in these issues. After this the international reactions to the war and gender issues regarding the war are brought up. Due to the many international forces involved in the conflict, the international response to the war regarding gender issues is important as international organizations and foreign forces had a noticeable impact on both the war and the gender issues regarding the war. The high level of military forces involved is also the reason that gender issues in combat are a small part of the analysis. The main focus in the chapter, however, is the impact the war had on Afghan national gender issues for the civilians in the country. This part is lined up chronologically to give an easy understanding of what the main gender issues were in a historic context.

#### ***4.1 Background to the 2001 Afghan war***

In the 1970s Afghanistan experienced social and economic change, as well as a change in women's rights as they had more representation in the Parliament and were allowed to attend universities and schools. At the end of the 1970s the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) made sure that massive land reform programs were set in motion and the age of marriage were raised to 16 for girls and 18 years for boys (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Although on paper this seems like a revolution for Afghanistan's politics with social and economic change, the Soviet invasion forced Afghanistan into a decade long war which again set the country back regarding growth and development (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

Afghanistan has faced many years of conflict since the Soviet Union invaded the country in 1979. The Soviet Union faced resistance in the Mujahedin groups in Afghanistan and the Mujahedin groups later faced a civil war. The civil war allowed Taliban, one of the rebel groups fighting against the Soviet Union, to gradually seize control over the capital Kabul. In 1996 they eventually took full control of the city (Strand, 2021). Since then, Taliban as an Islamic extremist movement ruled Afghanistan using the Sharia laws up until 2001 (Wetteland Stoa & Venberget, 2021). The simple understanding of the Sharia laws is that it is a set of rules on how to practice the Islamic religion (Johnsrud Zorgati & Vogt, 2021). In Taliban's case, they understood the laws in a way where all civilians had to practice the religion in a certain way and the only legal religion was Islam. This practice of Sharia resulted in decreased women's rights, a prohibition of Western culture like for example TV and death penalties for even small crimes (Stenersen, Johannessen, & Strand, 2022).

When Taliban seized power in the country there was a decrease in violence. The literal rule of Sharia banned Western culture and even the smallest crimes could lead to violent penalties for the ones committing them. Naturally this led the majority of the population to be obedient citizens to Taliban, which in turn can explain the decreased violence (Strand, 2021). In addition to the Sharia laws and their brutal governance in the country, the Taliban was a rather small threat to the Western world. What would later have catastrophic impacts on Western countries was Taliban's permission to Al-Qaeda to use Kabul as their operational base (Wetteland Stoa & Venberget, 2021).

Al-Qaeda is a terrorist organization. Their first leader and founder was Osama Bin Laden, and their goal is to wage a holy war to promote Islamic beliefs, and save the religion from the threats



of Western culture (United Nations Association of Norway, 2022). Al-Qaeda was, similar to Taliban, involved in the conflict between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. When the conflict came to an end, Osama Bin Laden and Abdullah Azzem agreed to continue the global battle for Islam. Bin Laden founded Al-Qaeda in 1988 or 1989, and in 1998 they attacked the American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya (United Nations Association of Norway, 2022). Their most known attack is still 9/11, where Al-Qaeda operatives hijacked flights and crashed them into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the last in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The 9/11 attacks were the triggering cause for the US-lead war on Afghan soil that started in the fall of 2001.

Although the Taliban, which had the power in the country, did not engage in the attack on that fateful day they were complicit in the sense that they provided Al-Qaeda a base and resources to plan and go through with the attack. The 20<sup>th</sup> of September the same year President George W. Bush declared the following:

*“The leadership of al Qaeda has great influence in Afghanistan and supports the Taliban regime in controlling most of that country. In Afghanistan, we see al Qaeda's vision for the world. Afghanistan's people have been brutalized -- many are starving and many have fled. Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television. Religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough. The United States respects the people of Afghanistan -- after all, we are currently its largest source of humanitarian aid -- but we condemn the Taliban regime. It is not only repressing its own people, it is threatening people everywhere by sponsoring and sheltering and supplying terrorists. By aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder. And tonight, the United States of America makes the following demands on the Taliban: Deliver to United States authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in your land. Release all foreign nationals, including American citizens, you have unjustly imprisoned. Protect foreign journalists, diplomats and aid workers in your country. Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, and hand over every terrorist, and every person in their support structure, to appropriate authorities. Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating. These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The*

*Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate.*” (Bush P. G., Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, 2001).

About two weeks later Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was launched. In the beginning the war involved mainly US air strikes on Al-Qaeda’s and Taliban’s forces (United Nations Association of Norway, 2022). The operation can be considered as an act of self-defense, but the main goal was the war on terror (Folk og Forsvar, n.d.). While the goal of Operation Enduring Freedom was to strike Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces, the UN Security Council allowed an international force in Afghanistan (Raake & Venberget, 2021). The force was called International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and their mission was to ensure safety in the capital Kabul and in nearby areas, until it expanded to ensure safety in all of Afghanistan in 2003. While the OEF is an offensive force and US-led, the ISAF was a tool for peacekeeping led by the UK. The forces both continued their work in Afghanistan until 2014. The peacekeeping operation ISAF was replaced with a new and smaller NATO-operation called Resolute Support Mission (RSM), while OEF was completed. The goal was for Afghan forces to take back control and the responsibility for keeping peace and stability in the country (Raake & Venberget, 2021). Through the years to come RSM continued until 2021 when all international forces withdrew and left the country in chaos and in a complex situation (Raake & Venberget, 2021).

During the period when OEF, ISAF and RSM was present in Afghanistan, the Taliban conducted several attacks on public buildings, car convoys as well as both Afghan and international forces. Many people lost their lives, but Afghan civilians suffered the biggest loss with more than 26 000 civilian deaths, in addition to 13 000 Afghan soldiers (Raake & Venberget, 2021). Although the Afghan soldiers were considered just that: soldiers, they most likely had family and friends which suffered their loss. In that sense the Afghan people suffered an even bigger loss during this period.

As President Bush said in his speech, if the Taliban did not hand over the terrorists, they would share the same faith as Al Qaeda. In practice this meant that since Taliban did not hand over the terrorists, the US-lead war on terror in Afghanistan applied to Taliban as well as Al Qaeda. The problem was, that even though they were the target, they most likely were not the only

ones affected by the war and /or suffering the war's consequences due to attacks on public buildings etc.

#### ***4.2 Gender issues prior to the 2001 Afghan war***

Gender issues in Afghanistan have a long history. To understand why this is an important focus in the war that started in 2001, one has to know something about the five years before this. These five years are highly relevant for the further analysis on how the main gender issues have been affected and/or changed throughout the war. The years mark the first Taliban government and the establishment of the Islamic extremist rules and at last the year 2001 marks the start of the war on terror.

In September 1996, the Taliban had seized control over the capital and soon after they controlled most of the country. This affected the gender issues in the country, both men and women. Through the laws enforced by the Taliban, the Sharia laws, set large boundaries on the freedom and possibility for equality. Men had to have a certain length on their beard and faced violent penalties if they attempted to cross the rigid rules of the Taliban regime. Women were no longer allowed basic human rights and the freedom of religion, and the freedom of speech was restricted for all civilians in Afghanistan under the rule of Taliban. The years prior to the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan the world was shook by the brutalities of the Mujahedeen's which had burnt down public buildings and put women in a position where they resorted to suicide to avoid rape and forced marriages (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). This led the US amongst others to support the Taliban takeover, with the assumption that the Taliban was to counter the "mismanaged" politics of the Mujahideens (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). This indicates the difficulties regarding gender issues in Afghanistan even before the Taliban took control of the country. It might have been a hope for change in the gender issues when Taliban seized control as they had the same enemy as for example the US. We now know that women and men were restricted many rights that many civilians in other countries took for granted. The laws were broadcasted through radio as televisions were forbidden. Women were not allowed to attend school, go outside to do other things than buy groceries without a male relative accompanying them, fancy shoes or clothing were forbidden for women as well as white shoes as this was the color of the Taliban flag (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

During this period the lack of freedom of movement was not the only challenge a regular Afghan woman faced; for example, Afghanistan's traditions with regards to marriage and

women's position in society is bound to peacekeeping rituals. Women who were "given away" to marriage represented a kind of truce between the families. In addition, the domestic sphere was expected to be private. What happened within this sphere was the head of the house's responsibility (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). These types of traditions of viewing women and marriage is not uncommon but does not necessarily justify it as women here can be used as a trade in peacekeeping between families despite them being an independent individual. Furthermore, there are traditions in Afghanistan which worsened the situation for women and girls compared to men and boys. The traditions include forced marriage, giving away girls to settle disputes, exchange marriages, "honor" killings and child marriage. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Geneva (OHCHR) published a report on these issues in 2010: *Harmful Traditional Practices and Implementation of the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women in Afghanistan* (UNAMA & OHCHR, 2010). The report showed how Afghanistan have been practicing harmful traditions which affected women through forced marriages, honor killings or exchange marriages (UNAMA & OHCHR, 2010). The report points out that in 2004, there was put up a legal framework in Afghanistan in order to break these harmful traditions. Nevertheless, it comes to show that relevant gender issues in Afghanistan cannot necessarily be seen in relation to war or fundamentalist ruling. The gender issues during this period made women into a trading value and restricted their access for necessary, adequate health care. The years between 1996 and 2001, Afghan women cannot be considered independent. Taliban made sure the laws controlled every aspect of life for women (Gregory, 2011). If Taliban alone is to blame for women's situation at this time is hard to tell. Some of it is due to the fundamentalist Islamic ruling of the country, but the structures which made women's situations more difficult can also origin from the time during the Soviet invasion. This is however not something that this thesis will investigate any further.

When examining the gender issues in these times, as well as the time to come after 2001, most of the focus on gender issues is directed towards women's issues and rights. However, the laws of Taliban (or the Sharia laws) did not only affect women in these years. Men were affected as well. Women were restricted from many basic human rights and their lives were controlled both in domestic life and in the public sphere. This cannot be seen as freedom in any type of way. However, some women might have a wish to become a stay-at-home mom and have their lives revolve around their families. It is freedom to allow this in addition to allow them a place in government, working life and all other aspects of society. When restricting half of the adult

household from working life for example, the other half is forced to make a living for the family. In practice this means that when a man and a woman who are married start a family, the man is restricted from his rights to be a stay-at-home father. His personal and private sphere is also experiencing the effects of the laws which force people to live a life based on gender and not personal preferences.

### **4.3 *The international dimension of gender issues in the Afghan war***

US forces with support from the British started military operations in Afghanistan in the fall of 2001 (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.), and official statesmen and other important persons stated that the war on terror that they conducted on Afghan soil would also benefit the gender issues, especially the situation for women and girls. A good example is the speech by Laura Bush, the US First Lady, in 2001 where she stated that women were to be liberated from Taliban's regime through the war on terror (Bush L. , 2001). President Bush also brought up gender issues in one of his speeches in 2001. He mentioned that women were not allowed to attend school, and he continued by explaining how this war was different from wars where the goal is territory and protection of sovereignty. This war was "*the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom*" (Bush P. G., 2001). This indicates that gender issues were debated in international fora's and was an important part of international politics, and the war on terror in Afghanistan was a war that was supposed to be giving civilians their freedom and a democratically elected government as well as eliminating the threat of terror. The actions made in Afghanistan could therefore be understood in context of the international gender issues, as well as in the political systems already established in Afghanistan.

In October 2006 the opening of the "Feminism and War" conference organized by the Women's and Gender Studies Department of Syracuse University was hosted in New York (Mohanty, Pratt, & Riley, 2009). During the conference an issue of feminism in justifying wars were made. The administration of President George W. Bush had argued that engaging in war in Afghanistan was justified on the grounds that it would help the cause of women's liberation (Mohanty, Pratt, & Riley, 2009). Feminism was the reason for which the US saw it as justified to engage war on Afghan soil in order to liberate women. Both the critique of traditional gender norms where women are seen as "lesser" than men and need to be protected (Kennedy & Dingli, 2019) and the critique of the essentialist way of perceiving gender (Solhjell, 2015) is represented in the use of feminism exercised by the Bush administration. The speakers at the "Feminism and War" conference examined war (more explicitly the wars the US engaged in at

the time) as economic globalization and as a direct military intervention and occupation which goal was to restructure legal and cultural systems, grow economic foreign policy in favor of the US and as a tool to reach imperialism (Mohanty, Pratt, & Riley, 2009). I would argue that the threat that Al Qaeda represented to the US after 9/11 is what triggered the US to engage in the 2001 Afghan war, but that the feminist perspective was a contributing factor to which the US justified acts of war with innocent civilians as possible victims. However, if the goal of the war, in this case, was to restructure legal and cultural systems, the postcolonial feminist tools to achieve gender equality is used in practice by the US. One could perhaps argue that the path to the goal was through imperialism, but the postcolonial feminist beliefs on reorganizing structures of society in favor of gender issues is still maintained through this. By trying to justify acts of war through feminism's core values, the international society made it clear that international organizations strive for equality, but at the same time saw the positive impacts that could occur for their own country.

The Human Rights Watch published an article in 2001 which drew focus on the importance of women's rights and the complexity of women's situation in context of gender issues (Human Rights Watch, 2001). In the year 2000 it was the fifth anniversary of the U.N.'s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Human Rights Watch had noticed an increase in rhetoric respect for women's human rights around this time, which again indicated the importance of gender issues in the international political sphere. However, Human Rights Watch also made it clear that the rhetoric was unmatched by meaningful action (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Two of the issues Human Rights Watch pointed out was the South African women who were unable to establish work contracts independently of their husbands, while at the same time, the South African government declared its commitment to women's rights on the conference in Beijing. The Taliban used rhetoric means to ensure the protection of their women and girls, while Taliban forces raped ethnic Hazara and Tajik women with impunity (Human Rights Watch, 2001). The organization pointed out the will to speak of gender issues and the protection of women and girls, while the power of action did not ensure the same protection nor more equality. In the case of the war in Afghanistan, the means taken were drastic and had a severe impact on the lives of civilians in the country. However, as the point made on the conference in 2006 stated, women in the conflict were seen as oppressed victims of Taliban's extreme Islamic regime. Both the President's and the First Lady's speech in 2001 are good examples of statements on how women were viewed as victims and not a participant part of the conflict with

Taliban. Even though the year prior to the international invasion in 2001 the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women peace and security underlined the importance of women in for example peace-building and prevention and resolution of conflict (OSAGI, 2000).

Afghanistan was State party to: International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan & Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2010, p. 4). Through these international human rights treaties, the country was obligated to ensure women's right to equality before the law and equal protection by the law. The international pressure to ensure women's rights and equality indicated that gender issues had been an important issue in international policy. It also indicated that the war had a lot of international attention, and the international society had a goal to make gender issues better in Afghanistan.

Internationally Afghanistan had been in the loop for a long period of time. In the summer of 1998 Taliban shut down the practices that aid organizations had put in place. This was done after the international society demanded an improvement on women's situation in the country. Also, the UN withdrew all its workers after receiving reports about abuse and harassment of its workers (Johannessen, Holmboe, & Tvedt, 2021). The responses to gender issues from the international society started before the outbreak of the war in 2001, for example through the closing of all the practices of aid organizations in 1998. However, at the beginning of the war the topic of gender issues became actualized through international involvement of military forces and the fight on terror and the rigid rules of the extreme Islamic regime. Throughout the war the international involvement continued, and as I will come back to in chapter 4.4, the international community initiated several measures through international agreements to get a better situation for gender issues.

The postcolonial feminist perspective on the international responses to gender issues in the war in Afghanistan lay a foundation for how the countries contributing with military forces to end the extremist Islam ruling. Through international treaties and pressure from the international society, the path to liberate women in particular were set. This clearly shows the continued

effects of the colonial thought through political ideologies through the East vs. West binaries. Afghanistan were to be liberated from the practice of ruling on the ground of the Sharia laws, making the country satisfy countries in the West. This can lead to a polarization of the parts where the West is trying to wipe out the cultural and religious practices in the country and Afghanistan is trying to protect their beliefs in the practice of law. Time would show that the US influenced future presidents, leaving the postcolonial part of the postcolonial feminism thought stronger. However, the postcolonial feminist approach would use the president through a democratic election to change structural norms and laws to give both genders equal rights in the country, and the hegemonic power would diminish the gap between women and men in the hierarchies of society.

#### ***4.4 Gender issues during the war in Afghanistan 2001-2021***

From 2001 until August 2021, international and national forces in Afghanistan fought a war against the Taliban. The years in between were filled with acts of war, uncertainty and some glimpses of what could have been the “new” and free Afghanistan. What was seen as the fall of the Taliban came as early as in 2001 (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.), but the war continued despite of this. Years later the President of the US, Joe Biden, said that the war had continued because of the hunt for Al-Qaeda’s leader Osama Bin Laden, but had later transformed into a nation-building process which was not intended in the first place (Biden, 2021). Building a democratic nation during wartime can be challenging and will most likely impact gender issues during the process. As international forces, with the US as one of the main actors, the case can be put right in the issues postcolonial feminism points out with the west vs. east binaries, while also confronting the structural gender issues within the society.

Already in the late 1990s some women’s rights groups urged the Clinton Administration to not recognize the Taliban government as it was oppressing women (Thomas & Katzman, 2017). Even though the US some time ago had been supporting the groups fighting the Soviet invasion, including the Taliban, the US had to shift focus when the Soviet Union withdrew (Thomas & Katzman, 2017). This already indicates how long gender issues have been a problem in Afghanistan, and how long the US had been involved in the Afghan politics. (Thomas & Katzman, 2017).

As many sources have noted, the start of the war on terror in Afghanistan was broadcasted and justified by the cover of being an act of goodness. A humanitarian crisis whose victims were



oppressed and in the need of help and rescue. This is how the Bush Administration fronted the war in 2001 (Gregory, 2011). In many ways I believe that this was the intention from the start. As addressed in the previous chapter, gender issues and inequality between genders became a noticeable issue during the Taliban period from 1996-2001. When international forces went in to lighten the gender gap and the issues related to this, they probably had the best intentions. As addressed in previous chapters; in the Western world most countries have way less inequality between genders than Afghanistan. As we know, war and conflicts have their own effects on gender issues. The good intentions from the international forces did somehow *change* the gender issues, but it did not *end* them. The Sharia laws forced on the population through Taliban were slowly wiped out, but the oppression of women and the lack of freedom for the population was still a fact and an ongoing problem throughout the years to come after the fall of the Taliban.

2001 is an important year in the war in Afghanistan. This was the year that the US-led involvement in Afghanistan started as an immediate response to the 9/11-attacks. The attacks on strategic Al-Qaeda and Taliban targets started and the ISAF, led by the British whose mission was to ensure safety in the capital Kabul and close areas around the capital, was set in motion this year. Some argue that due to these responses the anti-Western ideology and the Islamic fundamentalism increased (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). To some degree, this assumption might be right according to what was to come in the war in Afghanistan, especially the war between the international forces (mainly from the West) and the fundamentalist organizations. Postcolonial feminism gives a theoretical understanding to the West vs. East binaries which references the opposites between the developed countries and the undeveloped countries. It can also give a theoretical understanding to the structures which create differences between genders (Al-Wazedi, 2021). Some of these structures are directly inflicted by the fundamentalist thinking of women being fundamental to the family (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

In 2002 the National Solidarity Program (NSP) came in place to promote development in the rural parts of Afghanistan (Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov, 2012). In general, the program was meant to give the rural parts better infrastructures and village governance, however, the program also explicitly mentioned the promotion of gender equality as one of the main goals (Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov, 2012). The fall of the Taliban had been a mark of significant change for gender issues in terms of building more free and functional structures which was intended to give economic growth and a future with democratic institutions under the

governance of a democratically elected government. The international hope for Afghanistan's future, and therefore also the future of equal rights for men and women, seems to be high in this period of time.

In 2002, when international aid in form of money and assistance came to Afghanistan, President Bush held a speech where he talked about reconstructing Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). US started giving aid in a large scale in order to establish peace (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The UN also contributed to establish peace in the country, so much so that they established an assistance mission in Afghanistan: United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan). The same year Afghanistan witnessed a major institutional development when the formation of the ministry of women's affairs started and was authorized \$15 million per year (Katzman & Clayton, 2017; Katzman & Clayton, 2017).

The following year the US announced that the major combats were over. President Bush started to act on the plan for reconstructing Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Taliban had fallen and there was a plan to create stabilization and activities in order to give room for aid organizations and other forms of nation building activities. At this point there was hope for lowering the gender issues. With a plan to give room for aid organizations and building governments and structures of stability it is likely to imagine that women would have access to health care facilities needed and that girls and women can attend school and have gainful employments. Taliban were in many ways the face of oppression of women by forcing them to wear burqas. Although determining what women can wear is intrusive and have a strong symbolic effect, it is quite small in comparison to taking away their access to income and adequate health care facilities. With a plan for reconstruction and the foundation of the ministry of women's affairs the year before, 2003 could have been the start of the development for bettering gender issues.

In 2004 Afghanistan seemed to be on the path of a democratization and building a government. In January 503 Afghan delegates agree on a constitution (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). They thanked the US and their international partners for the opportunity to lay a foundation for democratic institutions and the framework for national elections. On October 9<sup>th</sup> Hamid Karzai was declared president after winning the election. The newly elected president tried to limit Taliban's power. His father was supposedly killed in a Taliban attack which gave Karzai

personal interest in defeating them (Filseth & Johannessen, 2019). Many of the warlords had more power than him despite the fact that he was the president. This failed attempt in reducing Taliban's position forced him to cooperate with the enemy in many cases, some of which included agreeing on laws that restricted the rights given back to Afghan women after Taliban's fall in 2001. His goal was to strengthen women's position in the country, but it failed due to Taliban's integrated power.

The newly elected president in Afghanistan Karzai and US President Bush issued a joint declaration in 2005. This declaration formally makes the Afghan government and the U.S. government strategic partners in the war on terror (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). More than six million Afghans voted during the parliamentary election in 2005, and the election is considered the most democratic election ever in Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Nearly half of those who voted in the election were women, and this was taken as a sign of improvement for gender issues in Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). In addition to female voters in the parliamentary election of 2005, the Constitution ratified in 2004, stipulated that about 25% of the seats in parliament "should" go to women, meaning that they was not reserved for female representatives, but there were an intention of letting women be part of the parliament (Ra'ees, 2006). Still, the analysis shows that women played an active role in the election, both as representatives and as voters. The Afghanistan Minister for Women Affairs even stated that the country's reaction towards women's leadership and the promotion of gender equality were positive (Ra'ees, 2006).

Considering the Sharia laws that were inducted from 1996, the women's participation in the election were a breakthrough worth celebrating. From being forced to stay at home and be obedient citizens to the Sharia laws, to now being able to participate in a democratic election is a step in the direction of equal rights. The election and the declaration between Afghanistan and the US did however not mark a time in Afghan history where considerable improvement relating to gender issues was a fact. US and other international partners may have done what was in their power in order to give some stability and democratic process in Afghanistan, but the war continued despite of this. Bin Laden gave a statement the year before, which showed that despite the desperate attempts on improving Afghanistan's military force and democratic institutions, the power in the terrorist organizations were still quite strong (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Both sides of the conflict seemed motivated to continue fighting, and by that

making the civilians in Afghanistan still trapped in the violence and instability that war brought along.

In 2006 the NSP had been inducting its program for five years and it was time for an evaluation. By now some changes had been made in regards of the democratic processes in the country where women now got a chance to participate. The mid-term evaluation of the program, published by Chr. Michelsen Institute, states that gender equality had been achieved in certain regions after the program came in place (Barakat & Strand, 2006). The program had been working towards better democratic infrastructure, improving skills and building functioning communities in rural Afghanistan. In certain regions they could see improvement in gender equality, and the vast majority of the government representatives could see improvement in legitimate authority and responsibility based on the principle of equality and fair representation (Barakat & Strand, 2006). By building self-governance in local communities and infrastructures which goal was to have a functioning society they improved the equality between genders in (some of) these regions. A change in the structures that target gender differently gave a better situation in terms of equality, just like the postcolonial feminism suggests.

It seems like this was a time to better the women's position in the country. Despite feminism aiming at both men and women, it is a known fact that gender inequality affects women in a different way than men. Through NSP the structures postcolonial feminism reference was changed, and the outcome was less inequality. However, though they focused on bettering women's position in the areas of NSP, they did have at least two critical points where the program during the mid-term evaluation did not meet its goals: a) they only saw an improvement of women's situation in some of the regions, meaning they failed in some regions the program was involved. b) Despite encouraging women's representation in the power and influence in the project process, these were typically limited to men (Barakat & Strand, 2006). The postcolonial feminist approach to the structures of society did not reach its full potential, despite the efforts made through the program. Feminism as a whole is, as previously mentioned, both a theory which target political and social structures and norms. The structures which postcolonial feminism points at were shifted, but the social norms and culture did not necessarily follow along in every region which might explain why they only got a visible change in some of the regions. In addition to these hypotheses of why the program did not have a better success rate, it has to be taken into the equation that the war was still ongoing, and not

long before the mid-term evaluation Osama Bin Laden had provoked the US, one of the biggest actors in the war.

During the summer of 2006 the violence increased, especially in the South of Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Number of suicide bombings went up, and the government faced difficulties establishing a functioning police force and getting enough assistance for security in the country. Human Rights Watch reported several deaths of civilians in an OEF airstrike in Sangin district, Helmand province, most of which were women and children (Human Rights Watch, 2008). When civilians are victims in the crossfires of war it can be seen in the context of men being recruited to the government's army. In interviews of several Afghan women who had been forced to flee, one of the women said the following:

*“With three of my daughters and two sons and their families, we were 32 persons. Our neighbors informed us that my sons are wanted by the government. They will come to get my sons. So we left after midnight—all 32 of us. We traveled during the night and rested at a hotel in Jalalabaad during the daytime. The next evening, the policemen who were looking for my sons, found us, beat one of my sons up [sobs]—beat him very badly and then left him thinking he was dead [more sobs]. We had to carry my son all the way to Torkham and then on to Peshawar. A very kind Pakistani family at the Masjid helped us. Not only did they help us get my son to the hospital, but they also assisted us in finding rooms for rent. We had a dangerous journey.”* (Ross-Sheriff, 2006).

When men are being forced to join the military the women and children are home alone. This can mean two things for gender issues: in times of war men are not given their freedom to choose what to do, and they lose their ability to have a job that secures income. Women are being left at home alone, and in risk of being caught in between bombings and shootings in areas of civilians. For the government to recruit for the military in war times is not unusual as the government are in need of people who can fight. Recruiting only men will give an unproportionable distribution of consequences and benefits. More on that in chapter 4.5. As the interviewee pointed out, the period where combats increased again, many were forced to flee giving the issue of women refugees and internally displaced women a place in the analysis of gender issues in Afghanistan. According to the 2008 Refugee Account published by the Norwegian Refugee Council, around a third of the population had fled the country since the

Soviet invasion in 1978. During the time before the report was published in 2008, many of them had been returning home in the belief that the war was coming to an end (Asgari Mollestad, et al., 2008). The report painted an image of a crisis for the refugees where they came home to destroyed infrastructure, no land or jobs and many had no way of identifying themselves. The situation is indeed a crisis unrelated to gender. However, there can be differences in how the refugee life affects genders. Norwegian Refugee Council did not mention women especially in their report in 2008, but they did publish some key points on how being a refugee affects women and men differently. The key points have a lot of focus on sexual violence which is affecting women in a larger scale than men. Both for people who still lives at home during conflict, and for women refugees the risk of sexual violence is large. However, while on the run they have less shelter from houses and family and community around them and without a job some of them have to go into prostitution in order to survive (Grønhaug, 2019). This does however not exclude men from being victims of sexual violence, and in men's cases of sexual violence it can lead to more stigma than with women. This is due to the social norms and culture of men being masculine and heterophile (Grønhaug, 2019).

After the increase in violence in 2006, the newly elected president of the US, Barack Obama, announced in 2009 that Afghanistan was one of the most important security policy areas for the US (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). This was related to the war on terror and the country seemingly would still use Afghan soil as a base to fight terrorist organizations and the resurgent of the Taliban. The same year President Karzai is re-elected as president in Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). There were some concerns about the election as the election went to a runoff election after it became clear that President Karzai did not have enough votes after all to win the election the first time around. His main rival pulled off before the runoff election leaving Karzai to win the election after all (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). This made the concerns for his legitimacy even more relevant and proving that the Afghan government was not as stable as wished. International cooperating partners have been announcing a wish for the Afghan governments to take over the responsibility for the security for its civilians and be in the leading position for the ongoing war. By an unstable presidential election, the country further proves the uncertainty related to withdraw more international forces in Afghanistan. However, for gender issues, 2009 became the year when Afghanistan with President Karzai enacted the Law of Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Justice, 2009). For gender issues, and especially for Afghan women, this was a huge step in the direction of eliminating the threats one is facing

due to their gender. As the report on harmful traditions in Afghanistan, issued by the United Nations Assistance Mission and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner in 2010, show: most of the harmful tradition practices which can be found in Afghanistan are harmful only to women and girls (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan & Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2010). The newly enacted law, viewed as a huge legislative step towards less gender inequality, did include a sentence which is contradictory to what could have been the perceiving truth about Sharia and the idea of the law: the law was supposed to be “Ensuring Sharia and legal rights and protecting the human dignity of women.” (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Justice, 2009, p. 5). Considering how the international society and many international organizations reacted to Taliban’s ruling based on the Sharia laws it may be perceived as contradictory to have a law which is eliminating violence against women with the use of religious laws which have been used to limit women’s rights before. However, this could mean a change in the Islamic framework to use Sharia as a legal base for protecting both genders, and women in particular. Through debating, challenging and redressing the Islamic framework to change the norms which were protecting the patriarchal structures in the Afghan society, the foundation of a real structural change which now targeted genders disproportionately had a chance of becoming a reality (Mir-Hosseini, 2006).

Parallel with the work on legislative rights for women especially, the US was committing more forces to Afghanistan with the intention of training Afghan Security Forces (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The intentions were still to give Afghanistan the tools to handle the war and the conflict by itself in the future. Despite the accusations of fraud in the presidential election and the evidence of an unstable security situation without international forces due to the resurgence of Taliban, Obama declared a timeframe of when they would start to withdraw their forces. While putting in more forces in 2009, he announced that the beginning of the withdrawal would start in 2011. More specifics on when they were withdrawing all forces and by that leaving the Afghan government more or less to themselves, was not announced in 2009, but in the end of 2010. At a summit in Lisbon, Portugal, NATO member countries signed a declaration where they agreed that by the end of 2014 they will be giving full responsibility for the security in Afghanistan to Afghan forces (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The legislative steps rooted in the government towards bettering the gender issues in Afghanistan show that the interference of international forces in Afghanistan might have been helpful. However, demanding more Afghan soldiers as they are withdrawing can possibly arise issues regarding

gender issues. Men are still being recruited to serve the military leaving women in a fragile position. The war seems to be considered to continue even though international forces withdraw leaving the fields and property rights still an issue. And the enforcement of the laws like EVAW may be troubling as the Afghan government still proves to be premature, unstable, and unfit to handle the situation.

In 2010 the debate on the international interference in Afghanistan and the consideration of the disadvantages of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and the international interference took off. A picture of an Afghan woman who had been a victim of violence where someone had cut off parts of her nose were published this year. The debate quickly developed into a campaign against both Taliban and the international interference in Afghanistan (Gregory, 2011). Taliban was accused of the violence and the international participants in the war were accused of not ensuring enough security for civilians, and especially for women (Gregory, 2011). The woman had tried to escape from her abusive husband and was punished for this by getting her ears and nose cut off and she was left to die. The EVAW which was enacted the year before should have given enough legislative grounds to protect the woman from violence in the first place as the law states that the violence the law is enacted to eliminate also includes “Causing injury or disability” (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Justice, 2009, p. 6). Gregory (2011) also presents other gender issues affecting women in particular: rape and sexual violence were still an issue that women in Afghanistan faced. In 2008 President Karzai faced massive allegations of pardoning two men convicted of gang rape of a girl, he claimed the accusation were false (Gregory, 2011, p. 188). Participating in politics were still connected with the fear of violence and women activists faced massive death threats. Some women activists were even shot or murdered. There were also reports saying that women’s security rarely were taken seriously and that women were told to stay quiet in order to stop making enemies, instead of allowing women to participate in politics and activist work and ensuring for their safety (Gregory, 2011). All these events and issues presented was cause for the debate of what was best for Afghanistan: Taliban or international forces. From the postcolonial feminist perspective, the laws enacted to eliminate these issues should have been more effective and reduced the structural differences targeting genders differently. However, the debate described by Gregory (2011) also raised some valid issues in the work of bettering the gender issues: these events are happening while the international forces are present in Afghanistan. International forces have during the decade of war been contributing to a stable situation and a certain increase of women’s rights. “Stable situation” in this case, I would say, is not a *good*



situation, nor the *best* situation, but rather a situation without real change for a period. Bureaucratic progress had been made, but the progress in the lived lives of civilians have until 2011 been relatively small after the fall of the Taliban.

The debate about international interference in Afghanistan was fueled again in the beginning of 2011 when American forces killed Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden. Bin Laden had been a primary target the last decade for his contribution in the 9/11-attacks (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). With the primary target down, people in countries participating in the war are starting to wonder what economic consequences the interference might bring. At the end of 2011 the international Bonn conference had a goal to achieve agreement on a roadmap for Afghanistan's political future (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The Bonn conference in 2011 was an extension from the same conference in 2001, where Afghanistan's political future was a topic as well. After the conference the conference conclusion said the following:

*"Ten years ago today at the Petersberg, Afghanistan charted a new path towards a sovereign, peaceful, prosperous and democratic future, and the International Community accepted the responsibility to help Afghanistan along that path. Together we have achieved substantial progress over these ten years, more than in any other period in Afghanistan's history. Never before have the Afghan people, and especially Afghan women, enjoyed comparable access to services, including education and health, or seen greater development of infrastructure across the country. Al Qaida has been disrupted, and Afghanistan's national security institutions are increasingly able to assume responsibility for a secure and independent Afghanistan."* (Bonn Conference, 2011, p. 1).

The Bonn conference led to more bureaucratic anchoring for a process of peace- and nation building where gender issues are taken into account. The message the conference conclusion was sending can be put directly into postcolonial feminist thinking whereas a process for building a democratic and functioning government has to involve both genders to reach the highest potential of democracy. When the Bonn conference took this perspective in the formulation of the conclusion it collided with the practices in Afghanistan earlier where women often was being kept out of the public and political sphere.

Although the conference may seemingly be of great importance for Afghanistan's chances of liberating themselves and becoming self-sustaining and secure, there were some concerns considering the conference conclusion. For one "the International Community" seemed to get credit for interfering in the Afghan war and for the progress made in the decade they have been present. However, remembering the start of the war and the first bombings in Afghanistan, the US and NATO-members did so in order to eliminate terrorist organizations in the country. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda were the main targets, not the government nor was there a concrete plan to build an Afghan government. A small part of the intention was to liberate women from wearing burqas and allowing them to use their basic human rights like education and freedom of movement, but also this was in context of the Taliban regime at the time. For gender issues war is rarely associated with a better situation for gender equality and gender issues, but rather a tool to achieve this. However, although the war and the liberation from Taliban in 2001 has improved the gender issues from then until 2011, one can question the real effects of these bureaucratic steps of progress for gender issues.

In 2012 a young activist girl was shot in the head by Taliban members at the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Her story went global and soon "everyone" knew the name Malala Yousafzai. In 2014 general major Asim Bajw published a tweet saying that the men responsible were caught in Pakistan. All of them had connections to Taliban in Pakistan (Henriksen & Majid, 2014). In the years prior to the attack on Malala, President Karzai had argued to move the international forces' focus to the Pakistani borders. He claimed the war on terror should be there, as the fight on terrorism were not in Afghan houses and villages (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Despite the president's argumentation on moving the focus of the international forces to the Pakistani border, during the Bonn conference he announced that Afghanistan required continued international assistance, and \$10 billion annually over the next decade in order to shore up security and reconstruction (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). In other words, the president's wish was to draw the military forces away from Afghanistan and towards Pakistan in order to fight terrorists, but he would like to continue the cooperation with the international community. The money and international assistance he claimed the country required in order to build a stable economy and reconstruction of the country came with a guarantee to stop corruption. Although Malala was shot in Pakistan, Taliban's men proved by the act that they are still a threat to women's freedom. Giving these circumstances the international forces may be a guarantee for the protection of women's freedom, given how the Taliban regime controlled both the public and private sphere of women during their ruling from

1996. However, the point made by Gregory (2011) about security forces not taking women's security seriously, it is possible that the suggestion of still international assistance on Afghan soil was nothing but the best of two evils.

However, both the Afghan government and US wanted the violence to end. There had been hope for peace talks with the Taliban since 2001. In 2012 Taliban broke off contact and indicated that they were not interested in negotiating with Kabul (Dobbins & Malkasian, 2015). The hope for the peace talks was to ensure that Taliban laid down its arms and accept the Afghan constitution, as well as sever ties with Al Qaeda (Dobbins & Malkasian, 2015). The peace talks ended in mistrust from all parties towards each other. However, coming so close to peace talks as they did during this period was a step towards what could have been peace in Afghanistan. This could again affect the gender issues to some extent as war seldom benefit gender issues. In 2013 there was an Afghan security takeover as the national forces took the lead in the security responsibility nationwide. There was a remaining ninety-five districts which NATO was in control of at this point, and they handed over the control of these to the Afghan forces (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The handover of control for the nation's security led the Taliban insurgency to escalate (Laub, 2014). This meaning that the withdrawal of international forces gave Taliban room to step up its insurgency, and its presence in neighboring countries as well, indicating that the war did not stop its growth or its goal of ruling Afghanistan.

The resurgence of Taliban had been financed by the production of narcotics and of trafficking (Laub, 2014). Both genders can be victims of trafficking. Although the physical damage is more or less the same for both when it comes to sexual violence, the psychological damages and the social consequences can be worse for men and boys, according to a report written by Rabia Akhtar (2019). In Afghanistan, where the patriarchy is strong and a man's masculinity is an important part of maintaining a place in the public sphere, being a victim of sexual violence can have enormous consequences in the lived lives of men (Akhtar, 2019). Akhtar (2019) argues that due to under-reporting of the cases where men and boys are victims of conflict-related sexual violence, the reality is that women and girls are not disproportionately affected by this. The under-reporting is, according to Akhtar, giving a picture of a situation where men and boys are not victims, while women and girls are. In addition, the shelters and other institutions/programs for victims of sexual violence are often only open for women and girls. However, a report published by The Serious Organized Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE) points out that women and girls are particularly vulnerable to being trafficked, and

this vulnerability is rooted in the Afghan social practices (Hoang, 2022). The report on harmful traditional practices show that women are in general more vulnerable for being victims of several harmful practices, most of which is rooted in the same view as Hoang (2022) points out: women are often viewed as property. Either way, the war on terror had not been sufficient in taking down Taliban. They had secured financial growth throughout the war by trafficking among other things, and this leaves gender issues with a structural problem where masculinity and safety shelters for victims being the key components which differently affect genders. Men/boys and women/girls face different issues when being victims of trafficking, and the help they can receive afterwards often leaves men with disproportionately large consequences. Their prospects of being an active member of society afterwards are also different, but here one should look more at the cultural aspects rather than the political aspects. Postcolonial feminism, which highlight the continued effect of colonialism to political ideologies and the socioeconomic structures, can draw parallel to the culture of patriarchy and the possibility to change the cultural assumption on who trafficking victims are. Through a feminist perspective it is easy to argue that these assumptions on who the victims are that structure the safety shelters in a way that exclude men should be changed. However, as the postcolonial feminist perspective highlight even further: the changes can be done through the continued effect the colonialism to political ideologies in order to achieve equal possibilities for accessing safety shelters.

Another attempt to establish a stable government in Afghanistan took place in 2014. After a contentious presidential election Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah signed a power sharing agreement called the National Unity Government (Adili & van Bijlert, 2016). The two main candidates for the position as President agreed to share the power in order to come to a solution to the functioning government. The goal was to form a functioning government where the constitution's values were the reality of Afghan's daily life. The power-sharing agreement was supported by the US (Adili & van Bijlert, 2016). On one side the Afghan politicians with the assistance of American officials tried to get a functioning government which had real power to build and maintain a society which a sovereign state should have. On the other, the attempts of peace talks with the Taliban continued. Through Qatari intermediaries, the US and the Taliban arranged on a trade: the release of Bowe Bergdahl, a U.S. Army sergeant who was held by Taliban, in return for the transfer of five former Taliban officials from Guantánamo to Doha (Dobbins & Malkasian, 2015, p. 57). The peace talks, however, stalled once again after this success, where both parties held up their end of the agreement. After the agreement no one

followed up on the success, which made the process stop once again (Dobbins & Malkasian, 2015).

Newly elected President Ghani, had during his campaign promised to take some measures for the women's issues. One of the measures he tried taking in 2015, one year after the election and the power-sharing agreement, was to nominate a female to the supreme court (Rasmussen, 2015). Anisa Rassouli was nominated as the first female in Afghanistan to the supreme court. However, she lost in parliament by nine votes, and President Ghani was asked to nominate someone else to the position (Rasmussen, 2015). Her nomination and her 88 votes show that the support of a women in supreme court was not insignificant, but that many in parliament supported the first woman in the supreme court's history despite it being too little to get her in. Many representatives in parliament were absent the day the voting for her nomination took place. Among the representatives who were absent were women representatives, which could have made a difference (Raghavan, 2015). Getting equal representation of gender in the important institutions of government should, taken the resent history with the Taliban regime's control of women's working life in consideration, be of great importance especially for the female representatives in parliament. Some of the critique of Rassouli's nomination was that due to her gender she would not be fit to be a judge in the supreme court. According to Sayed Mohammad Musa Jinab, a lawmaker from Badghis, said women's tenderness and softness by virtue of being a women would not make her fit to give the right penalties for those who have been convicted (Raghavan, 2015). This statement from parliament representatives is perhaps one of the most important perspectives that feminism have brought up.

*“Article 118 of the Constitution of Afghanistan stipulates the qualifications for members of the Supreme Court. A member of the Supreme Court should:*

- *be at least 40 years of age;*
- *be a citizen of Afghanistan;*
- *hold an advanced degree in law or sharia law and have extensive knowledge of and experience in the judicial system of Afghanistan;*
- *have high ethics and a good reputation;*
- *have not been convicted of crimes against humanity or felonies or deprived of civil rights by a court; and*

- *not be a member of any political party during his or her tenure on the Court.*” (Nezaami & Ahmad, 2015)

Even though Anisa Rassouli qualified to be a judge at the Supreme court, she met obstacles related to her gender. The years she had used on education and her experience from earlier work within the field did not make up for the fact that she was a woman. The structures that target gender differently were changed the minute the President nominated a woman. However, the cultural structures and norms seem to have grown so strong that there were obstacles that went beyond the formal structures. It was possible to nominate a woman, but the real possibility for being voted in were smaller. Article 118 of the Constitution of Afghanistan does not stipulate gender as a qualification that members of the supreme court needs, but still the only woman nominated did not get through the voting of the parliament and the President was asked to nominate another member who had the required qualifications. In addition to the required qualifications the members of the parliament expressed their wish for a male nominee for the place. The postcolonial feminist goal of achieving structures that does not different on gender took a step in the right direction with the nomination, but the real change of structures was not achieved when the nomination was stopped due to the nominee`s gender.

Up until 2015 Afghanistan showed improvement in the legislative structures which helped bettering the gender issues. However, a report by UNAMA and OHCHR on the mediation and court adjudication of cases of violence against women showed that many gender issues remained (UNAMA & OHCHR, 2015). The report highlighted seven key challenges: 1) Gaps in existing legal framework, 2) Lack of standardized regulations of mediation, 3) uneven training of actors mediating cases, 4) lack of enforcement of mediated agreements and decisions, 5) weaknesses in the criminal justice system, 6) impact of cultural and religious attitudes on women`s decisions, and 7) economic vulnerability (UNAMA & OHCHR, 2015, ss. 28-32). The war that started in 2001 had changed the gender issues drastically from when women were put under extreme control by the regime. The progress that had been made through the war had been implemented by the Western world through US and other international agreements. Key challenge number 6 and 7 show that the progress in formal structures did not guarantee a real change in lived lives of, in this case, Afghan women. The cultural and religious limitations were still reality, and although women were now allowed to work, the employment rates of women were still low. All this is leaving gender issues as an unresolved issue over a decade into the war.

In 2017 the Taliban had grown as strong as ever and Donald Trump became the new President of US. The military forces from US described the war as stalemate (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). As the war continued, the US remained a highly important actor in the war. President Trump announced that his first instinct was to pull out, even though this was said to be a time during which the UN reported an uptick in civilian casualties. The president therefore “*press ahead with an open-ended military commitment to prevent the emerge of `a vacuum for terrorists`*” (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Internationally President Trump got massive critique on the way women`s rights were being treated in US. His view on women`s place in the home and workplace resulted in demonstrations for women`s rights in the US (Frothingham & Phadke, 2017). For the war in Afghanistan this could meant that the fight for women`s rights in the formal structures could get less support from one of the war`s main actors. While the political situation in US continued to cause debates on the President, the peace talks between US and Taliban continued, in the beginning of 2019 the peace talks had reached “*their highest level yet`*”, when they started to come to an agreement of the US to withdraw its troops in exchange for Taliban pledging to block international terrorist groups from operating on Afghan soil (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). This agreement would fit the realist approach where US were defending their country from terrorist attacks like 9/11. If the goal was to protect US from those who were responsible for the 9/11-attacks, this agreement would favor the road to the goal. Although gender issues were not mentioned by President Trump in his speech on his military plan for Afghanistan (Trump, 2017), gender issues would be severely affected by the agreement. In a feminist approach, the withdrawal of troops who had been the guarantee for the work on gender issues and building a functioning government with the responsibility for the population`s safety and following international treaties and laws like EVAW, the reality would likely be set back to 1996 where women`s lives were controlled by the regime. However, the peace talks were cancelled in 2019. President Trump tweeted that he cancelled a meeting with Taliban and President Ghani after an American soldier was killed in a Taliban attack. Taliban responded with threats about attacks that will increase the number of deaths (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.).

In 2020 the US and Taliban did sign an agreement on a path to peace and initiated that intra-Afghan negotiations should begin shortly after (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The agreement would lead to a decrease in military forces from US leaving Taliban in a strengthened position when it comes to combat. President Ghani stood on his demands for women and their

legal and religious rights (Tolo News, 2020). Taliban demanded the country to be governed through an Islamic system (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). The fragile government with President Ghani showed an eagerness to allow both genders equal rights, and that the establishment of the ministry of women`s affairs and the legal obligations to laws like EVAW was important and had a place in the Afghan society. However, the Taliban, which had grown strong over the years of war, gave signals of wanting to go back to the rule of Sharia. Although the gender issues in the war had changed since 2001, there was still work to be done in order to meet the legislative needs for protecting women and to meet the male victims of sexual violence with the help they needed. However, the ground work had been done. Both genders were allowed to work, take part in the public sphere and have representatives in important institutions of the government. The structures that postcolonial feminists would say targeted genders differently had been changed in order to prevent gender issues. Taliban`s demands and their position in the war threatened this work and the women in Afghanistan could face the control of the Taliban soon.

The job of withdrawing forces gained momentum in 2021. In the fall of 2021 newspapers all around the world showed that the situation in Afghanistan got worse fast. August 15<sup>th</sup> 2021 NRK, the Norwegian National Broadcasting, published the news that Taliban would declare Afghanistan to be an Islamic emirate (Norwegian National Broadcasting, 2021). Later that same day NRK published a new article showing a tweet where Taliban was inside the President palace, announcing that they would call Afghanistan the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the same name of the country that the Taliban used the last time they were in power (NRK, 2021). The following fall NRK published a number of articles describing the situation in Afghanistan. The international society condemned many of the rules Taliban reinstated. Boys and men were allowed back to school after the massive evacuations that took place, but women and girls got their rights restricted gradually throughout the fall (NRK, n.d.). A women`s rights activist begged the international society for help, fearing all the work for gender issues throughout the last two decades would fall apart as the Taliban had not changed. UNHCR supported the activist and added that about 80% of the civilians on the run were women and children (Kjendlie & Waaler, 2021). It was reported that Taliban`s promises to take care of the Afghan women`s rights were empty words as the reality was significantly different from their rhetoric (Kjendlie & Waaler, 2021). While people were questioning the legitimacy of Taliban, a Taliban spokesperson announced that they would find a way to allow women in government (Jarstad & Wolasmal, 2021). However, the rigid rules to control women and placing them on the outside



of almost every aspect of life, continued and in December the same year women were also restricted from the freedom of movement, and they were also forced to wear appropriate clothes like a burqa or hijab (Hotvedt, 2021).

The Afghan gender issues were back to where it started at the beginning of the war. Women faced an extreme control over their lives and lost their jobs and therefore financial stability. A documentary with Ramita Naval was released in 2022 where she met Afghan women and Taliban spokesmen to find out how women's situation was after all international forces had left the country so sudden during the evacuations in 2021 (Shah, 2022). The name of the documentary was *Afghanistan: No Country for Women*. Naval spoke to women who had been imprisoned for unmoral behavior, women who worked under the radar in an attempt to help other women escaping the claws of Taliban and she spoke to Taliban spokesmen. The women she spoke with told stories of lives lived in fear with no or little freedom to move, attend school or work and relatives who were beaten by Taliban members in order to get a hold of the women she spoke with. It showed video clips of a man being beaten on the street for trying to stop a forced marriage and women who had started a radio station no longer allowed in the room of the workplace while men were there. The first time Naval visited the ministry of women's affairs the walls outside were decorated with portraits of women, the second time she was there the wall only had an instruction on how women should dress appropriately. The ministry of women's affairs was closed and replaced with the ministry of morality. All the progress made for Afghan gender issues were wiped away leaving the hospitals with more victims of domestic violence and suicide attempts, which they also showed in the documentary.

The war raised several gender issues, but all in all there had been progress with the ratification of the EVAW law, the opening of the ministry of women's affairs and the structural changes which allowed both genders to be represented in important institutions. After the withdrawal of international forces, the situation for gender issues worsened. Human rights were no longer a partial reality of the civilians in Afghanistan. The Taliban spokesperson who talked to Naval said they closed the ministry of women's affairs as it was not their intention to differentiate between men and women, and therefore women should not have their own ministry which worked for their rights alone. As earlier mentioned, the gender issues were not ideal during the war as it raised several gender issues, but it seems like the war was the best of two evils.

#### ***4.5 Gender issues in combat***

Some of the sub-branches of feminism have made a claim that the role one inhabits in combat is predetermined by gender (Gregory, 2011). In post-colonial feminism, where the target is the structures which distribute burdens differently based on gender, these feminist branches can meet in the crossing of formal structures and social norms. Men are expected to inhabit the role of the fighter, the one who takes on the hard work and risks his life. This is also related to Kennedy and Dingli's (2019) statements of the gender roles in combat and what is considered masculine and feminine activities. It can also relate to the interviewees mentioned earlier where the government was hunting for men to join the military. These assumptions on gender in combat create at least two different dilemmas. The first being that women are disempowered in their ability to take action and participate in politics and/or war. The second being that men are forced to be the warriors in society, and the masculinity men often have is used as a weapon in war. In these assumptions about gender, women and men are not equal, but one can take it one step further and look at the homophobic structures that also appear in this misogynistic way of ranking gender.

When saying "men are forced to" go war, it is not only about freedom and the individual interest in participating. As mentioned in chapter 2, women have different health prospects than men due to pregnancies. In the same way men, who are forced to participate in combat due to their gender, are given different health prospects because of combat. Dr. Joseph Geraci is one of the US veterans from the war in Afghanistan. His veteran patients after the war in Afghanistan suffer from multiple mental disorders like acute suicide risk, anxiety, depression, PTSD, substance use and adjustment disorder (Richman, 2021). The long list of problems which occur after serving the military on deployments underlines the disadvantages that almost exclusively affect men. Although the problems after deployment are different from veteran to veteran, the inequality makes itself visible in the overwhelming men who face these problems, while women in large do not have to serve the military through deployment.

During missions the gender issues are visible from all angles. According to American veteran Andrea McClam, who served as the only female in her crew, the difference between how it was for women in America and how it was for women in Afghanistan were brutal (Kassraie, 2021). Her experience was that women in the US could take everything for granted, but in Afghanistan women were treated like they weren't there. She said that women in Afghanistan weren't spoken to. However, the Norwegian soldier Silje Johansen Willassen had another experience

on being a female soldier in Afghanistan. She wrote that in her experience being a female soldier gave the forces an invitation to the women in Afghanistan and therefore also got to acquire relevant and important information on the culture in which the soldiers were sent to work in (Willassen, 2010). Willassen also pointed out that she could drink tea with men in Afghanistan, as she was not the same threat to them as her male coworkers.

Both McClam and Willassen are giving good examples to why all genders should be represented in the military forces. To provide the locals with the best tools for building good infrastructures and democratic political governments, the intercultural understanding is important. As established early in the thesis, the main goal for nearly all of the international interventions were to give Afghanistan a foundation to build a nation of their own.

Intercultural understanding is a term often used in relation to aid-work. Scholars claim that all form of aid-work is doomed to fail if not done in context of the intercultural understanding (Tolo, 2015). Being a soldier in war is not necessarily viewed as aid-work the same way as medical help or logistics in relation to food and other necessary supplies. Nonetheless they are giving development help. Tolo's definition of aid is all work done by rich countries to ensure help and support to poorer parts of the world. This way military programs like the ones in Afghanistan can be seen as aid-work. The soldiers are given lectures in the foreign culture which they work in through the informal meetings with the local women, and men. Willassen mentioned these informal meetings which she can do by virtue of being a woman (Willassen, 2010). The Norwegian military had not been too focused on women earlier in the war, but having female soldiers gave them an insight in the life of women in Afghanistan. Furthermore, they get an insight on the cultural assumptions which is a dominant factor to succeeding in helping the women and children of Afghanistan. Willassen's thoughts on how it was beneficial to have women in the forces, strengthens the post-colonial feminist assumption about targeting specific structures to achieve gender equality. As mentioned earlier, many of the international forces were supposed to ensure safety and train domestic forces to one day withdraw without risking a Taliban takeover. To ensure this safety and give the proper training one should use the population as a whole in order to have the full effect. The additional feeling of safety when one can understand and feel a connection to the forces is an extra bonus for those affected. What Willassen is referring to here has also been brought up by the Norwegian military in context of building societies where soldiers are stationed (Maaland, 2006). Women in combat are seen as a good way of building trust and cooperation with local civilians.

There are some who see women in combat as a challenge, and the gendered assumptions for men and women are even analyzed in an essentialist way. Collins-Dogrul & Ulrich referenced Brownson (2015) and claimed her analysis of women in combat is essentialist when she stated that men and women want to have sex with each other (Collins-Dogrul & Ulrich, 2018). The sexuality of humans seems to be a constant barrier for gender issues, even when it does not take homosexuality in to account when using sexuality as an argument (Collins-Dogrul & Ulrich, 2018). Women's physiologically shape is also used against women in combat, and there are claims that women do not have what is needed for ground combat (Quester, 1977). However, one must take under consideration that not all men who pass the physical test are muscular, some become strong during their physical exercises required by the military. The women can do the same, given the same opportunities. The risk of pregnancies are present and have been used as an argument to ban women from participating in combat (Quester, 1977).

Men and women have different physiological prospects related to reproductive health, but banning women from combat due to reproductive health seems to easy. Allowing women to participate in combat will play a key role in the peacemaking processes (Karl, 2012). For men, women and children of Afghanistan building peaceful societies has to be the main goal in order for them to live a stable life which includes education, work and a family life.

The 2001 Afghan war saw changes in the gender balance in combat. Women were gradually taken more seriously and their role in the war was gradually used to benefit the war (Crosskruger, 2008). However, the extremist side of the war could also benefit from the use of women in combat. With the gendered assumptions of men and women, female suicide bombers could be used in order to get closer to the target undetected (de Leede, 2014). Their male counterparts were suspected of being suicide bombers more easily due to the assumptions of male characteristics.

The gender issues in combat are, similar to almost every gender issue, often rooted in the sexualization of women and the assumption that they are softer and less fit to join combat due to physiological assumptions. The continued sexualization of women is challenging their rights in Afghanistan in general due to the patriarchal and partly misogynistic laws, and in combat it is used as arguments for banning them from participation. However, the war in Afghanistan has shown that women combatants are a tool for peacebuilding and for building trust with the

civilians in context of peacebuilding. The structures of combat being male dominated are starting to shift and changing the formal structures for gender equality like the postcolonial feminist approach argues is important.

## **5 Conclusion**

When I started writing the thesis the goal was to identify the main gender issues regarding the war in Afghanistan. This understanding of the main gender issues, I hoped, would give some key points on how to avoid the same gender issues in future Afghanistan. Through feminist methodology the thesis has been trying to capture how men and women have been experiencing the war and how gender issues have been affected by the war. The international dimension and interference, and the national dimension which were important aspects of the war, and included the Taliban and combats, made it natural to use the postcolonial feminist approach to capture the structures revolving the different dimensions. The national structures of society which targeted genders differently and the international aspect of the West vs. East binaries could be confronted using this theory.

The focus on the structural gender issues gave an understanding of the experiences of men and women in general, but did not capture the differences of the rural and urban gender issues for example. However, I believe, the structures which is targeted in the thesis will affect the whole population in some degree, and is the starting point for achieving real gender equality in Afghanistan. The structures also show that women's rights is the most important aspect of gender issues during this war. There have been examples of gender issues affecting men more than women, for example through military duties and the consequences connected to combat, but due to the foundation of gender issues laid by the Taliban, the gender issues during the war continued to be women-oriented.

The announcement of Taliban's fall came early after the US-led invasion in 2001, but the extremist group continued to grow through the financial stability that narcotics and trafficking gave them. The fall meant that the international and national forces had taken over the power in the country, and Taliban's regime and time in government was over. It did not mean that Taliban was dead, and the group continued to be an important participant in the war in Afghanistan representing the rigid rules and an unbearable situation for gender issues.

International and national politicians tried reconstructing Afghanistan over several years. Democratic elections were held, and presidents were elected with international support. Due to international pressure and influence, progress for women's rights were made. Women were legally allowed to participate in politics, working labor and education. Although the case with Anisa Rassouli showed that progress on gender issues took time despite the structural and legal changes which were supposed to ensure equal possibilities for men and women. Not only were there changes in the possibilities for participating, but Afghanistan and international organizations also put focus on the violence Afghan women and girls could face. Through enacting on international conventions there were indicators that gender issues would be handled with the political power needed. The ratification of EVAW was one of the most important steps of progress of gender issues during the war, but with the lack of sufficient government and security in Afghanistan, the legal changes came in short and was often not changing the lived experiences of gender issues. Harmful traditional practices were challenging the gender issues. Civilians, and especially women, were facing major risks of being victims of different forms of sexualized violence due to the harmful practices.

The analysis of the gender issues regarding the 2001 Afghan war showed that there are many different gender issues in Afghanistan. The main gender issues are, as mentioned, related to women's rights and is often connected to the formal structures of Afghanistan. By changing these, the possibility of changing the cultural and social norms is rising. The war had relatively little effect on actually changing the experienced gender issues, but did make progress on the legislative and structural gender issues. Taliban's regime prior to the war gave gender issues relatively much focus from the international society and the national society when the war on terror began, and the focus continued throughout the twenty years international forces were involved in Afghanistan. This might have led the war to contribute to gender issues in positive ways. Although the violence that follow war is affecting gender issues contribute to several issues, the war gave Afghanistan a sense of security, support, and economic stability to start a process of building a stable government with increasing women's rights as one of the goals.

The main gender issues regarding the war, that I found, was that the attempts of building national security and democratic government did not succeed. Structural changes in favor of women's rights were made, but the changes were not sufficient enough to give women real possibilities of participation in all democratic institutions. Postcolonial feminisms way of approaching gender issues through structural changes did not have the effect one could wish

for. Given the example of a female nominee to the supreme court, the cultural changes did not change as fast as the structures did. The implications were that the gender issues remained in the lived lives of the Afghan women in particular through gender based assumptions in the Afghan society.

On paper the changes that had been made on gender issues could have been the changes leading to economic growth and a stable government. Viewing the whole population as a resource has economic value. The country was on a path to what could have been a new and more equal country before the second takeover by Taliban. During the war, gender issues were in a tense and fragile situation with women's rights in particular. Sexual violence, lack of security, and exclusion from important institutions were a continued issue throughout the war. Women's rights was addressed by many, but the lived experiences seemed to remain the same during the twenty years of war from 2001 until 2021.

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