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Afghan Women and Structural Violence: the implication of discourse in the War on Terror

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September, 2023



SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

Department of History

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Acknowledgements

Throughout my academic path I was lucky to have fundamental support from family, friends, coworkers, and mentors that allowed me to pursue my interests and integrate school and work. To all of them my sincere thanks follow.

To my supervisor, Professor Giulia Daniele for all her patience, guidance, and dedication in the process of writing this thesis, especially during all my adjustments and doubts.

Thank you to my parents, my brother, my grandparents, and my partner for all the emotional support and incentive during the most difficult times, and for all the patience and understanding during my absences.

To my friends for all the kindness that they showed me and the incredible help during the writing of this dissertation. Thanks for all the meetings in libraries, and motivational speeches, to all the walks and countless zoom conversations. I am grateful to have you in my life: Daniel, Bárbara, Carolina, Denise, and João.

A special thank you goes to Corine, the first friend I made in college and my literature companion. I will always miss you.

My gratitude goes to my former team during my internship for all the knowledge they installed in me, for the incentive and availability during and after my time with them. Also, to my new colleagues and employer for giving me time and flexibility to write the dissertation, as well as always checking in on me. Thank you for all the support.

A very special thanks to Dr. Ana Lúcia Domingues as without her I would not have finished my academic journey. She helped me understand that mental health is just as important as physical health, and to see that no matter the hardships I was strong enough to overcome them with no shame.

Lastly, thank you to all the participants interviewed for allowing me to complete this study, sharing their experiences of life in a conflict zone, and trusting me to listen. With all of you I began to understand the Afghan struggle through a new lens. I hope I made you proud and hope that your stories are shared further. I dedicate my work to you.

Resumo

Esta dissertação explora o resultado dos ataques terroristas do 11 de setembro e a formação da chamada “War on Terror”, particularmente no Afeganistão. Os Estados Unidos invadiram o Afeganistão após o regime Talibã se recusar a entregar Bin Laden, desenvolvendo uma narrativa em torno da “War on Terror” que mobilizou os direitos da mulher. Ao ignorar as ações americanas que levaram à criação dos Talibã, os EUA usaram os direitos da mulher num jogo político, o que levou à criação de uma retórica dicotômica entre o tratamento das mulheres no Ocidente e o tratamento das mulheres em países de maioria muçulmana, que “precisam de ser salvas”, sendo o véu o maior símbolo dessa opressão, que representa a falta de direitos e de agência. Apesar da clara violação dos direitos das mulheres e da opressão sofrida sob regimes como o regime Talibã, o discurso americano reforçou um sentimento de superioridade Ocidental sobre o “Outro”, baseado numa teoria chamada “orientalismo de género” que conduz à apropriação das vozes das mulheres afegãs pelo Ocidente, sem reconhecimento da sua agência e individualismo, numa representação que pode ser descrita como neocolonialista e paternalista. Este discurso será contraposto com as perspectivas de mulheres afegãs sobre o conflito, para analisar se as narrativas perpetuadas por Washington ajudaram, de facto, a atingir a igualdade de género no Afeganistão, ou se agravaram a violência estrutural sofrida pelas mulheres.

Palavras chave:

Afeganistão, Estados Unidos da América, orientalismo, direitos das mulheres, violência estrutural, discurso

Abstract

This dissertation explores the aftermath of 9/11 and the creation of the War on Terror, particularly in Afghanistan. The United States invaded Afghanistan as the Taliban regime refused to give up Bin Laden, creating a narrative around the idea of the War on Terror that mobilized women's rights. Ignoring America's actions and support that led to the formation of the Taliban, the US used women's rights as a political play leading to dichotomous rhetoric between the treatment of women in the West and women in Muslim countries who needed saving, with the biggest symbol of this oppression being the veil, representing a lack of rights and agency. Despite the clear violation of women's rights and oppression under regimes such as the Taliban, the American discourse reinforced a sense of western superiority over the "Other", based on a theory called gendered orientalism leading to an appropriation of women's voices by the West without acknowledging their agency and individualism, in a representation that can be described as neocolonialist and paternalist. This discourse will be counterposed with the perspectives of Afghan women on the conflict, to understand if the narratives perpetuated by Washington did, in fact, help improve gender equality in Afghanistan, or if it further aggravated structural violence faced by women.

Key words:

Afghanistan, United States of America, orientalism, women's rights, structural violence, discourse

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List of Acronyms

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CDA	Critical discourse analysis
EU	European Union
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SDGT	Specially Designated Global Terrorists
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
US	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Introduction

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks that took place on the 11th of September 2001 on American soil, the United States of America, led by then President George W. Bush, launched military operations on Afghanistan, and later in Iraq. What came to be known as the War on Terror, began under the pretense of fighting terrorism, specifically Al-Qaeda, and capturing Osama bin Laden (the perpetrator of the attacks). Still, after the defeat of the Taliban regime in the first months of the intervention, and the later assassination of bin Laden, the US and its NATO allies remained in Afghanistan until August 2021. What began as a counterterrorism operation, quickly evolved into a reconstruction and development mission, focused on the establishment of supposed peace and democracy in the country.

To justify a two-decade war the US disseminated discourse that had women's rights at its core. In politics and in the media, the released narrative stated that the US presence in Afghanistan was needed to "Save Muslim Women" from the horrors of the Taliban's theocratic regime, instrumentalizing discourse based on a gendered perspective of Orientalism. Yet, the US failed to mention their involvement in the emergence of the Taliban, or how decades of conflict could affect women, perpetuating physical, psychological, and structural violence.

Moreover, since 2019, but, primarily in the last two years, that narrative was shattered, because of the rushed negotiations between the then President Donald Trump's Administration and the Taliban, where the Afghan Government was excluded, resulting in a chaotic withdrawal in August 2021, allowing the Taliban to rise to power once more. Now, while the media criticizes President Biden's decision to leave Afghanistan, the Administration still defends its actions, and both the US and the international community seem to have forgotten Afghanistan in the face of other severe international concerns. However, in the last two years, women in Afghanistan have been enduring policies limiting their movement, their political participation, their employment, and their education, as the Taliban create a gender division in the country.

The present dissertation intends to analyze the construction of discourse surrounding the efforts to promote equal rights in Afghanistan, through a comparison between US presidential discourses and interviews with Afghan women. In addition, it will be analyzed further how Afghan women were affected by the conflict in structural

terms, to understand if the foreign intervention helped improve women's rights. Finally, the dissertation will provide insight on the current Taliban regime, particularly the policies surrounding women's issues. The achievement of the presented objectives is based on the main research question: How did the instrumentalization of discourse in Afghanistan by US President's impact structural violence against women, not only during the US intervention, but also after August 2021?

Chapter 1: War on Terror – historical and political contextualization

The War on Terror emerged as a response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (also known as 9/11) in the World Trade Center, Pentagon and Pennsylvania. “On the command of Osama bin Laden, [-], 2,986 American civilians perished in the space of minutes” (Cobbs & Blum, 2017, 496), leading the former US President George W. Bush to declare war on terrorism to dismantle Al-Qaeda and capture Osama bin Laden, which culminated in a twenty-year war in Afghanistan.

Before 9/11, the definition of terrorism and the policies to prevent and/or deter it were not standardized in the Western world, but generally terrorism was defined as a “tactic to coerce behavioral change in an adversary” (Dobrot, 2007, 6). In the context studied, Al-Qaeda “rejected the very idea of its [the US] global primacy and in particular the presence in the Middle East (...) of military units” (Bigsby, 2006, 4), using terrorism as a tactic to discourage Western presence in the Middle East. While the war against terrorism led to legitimacy questions, the US claimed that under Article 51 of the UN Charter, which recognizes “the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs” (Smith & Thorp, 2010, 3), they had the rightfulness to engage in a military intervention following the 9/11 attacks. Additionally, the UNSCR 1368 calls for efforts against terrorism and cooperation to bring terrorists to justice, expressing “readiness to take all necessary steps to respond to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and to combat all forms of terrorism” (UNSC, 2001). However, as mentioned by Connah (2021, 72), it did not legitimize the invasions of Afghanistan, and Iraq.

The invasion of Afghanistan was justified under the fact that the Taliban regime was harboring in its state a terrorist group, Al-Qaeda, refusing to give them up. So, on the 7th of October 2001, the US began a bombing campaign against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda

starting Operation Enduring Freedom, joining the Northern Alliance¹. With the easy overthrow of the Taliban regime, in December 2001, under UN regulation, major Afghan factions signed the Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, or, as it is known, the Bonn Agreement. Under the Agreement, an Interim Government was put in place, the conditions for future presidential and parliamentary elections were set up, preparations for a constitution were arranged, and the news of a new justice system and Supreme Court were announced (Edwards, 2010, 10).

However, the Agreement had weaknesses since it “sidelined regional players, notably Iran and Pakistan, marginalize[d] the largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns, and its avoidance of questions related to human rights and past abuses undermined its legitimacy for many Afghans” (Goodhand, 2010, 82). Authors such as Zyla and Grant remind the US of its inability to address “local contexts, actors and knowledge” (2022, 3), imposing a model of governance different from the traditional methods in Afghan society. Still, the most significant weakness was its alignment with former warlords and mujahideen² commanders, profiting in positions that “have been earned through violence and war profiteering” (Jackson & Minoia, 2018, 1093).

After 2002, the idea of a solely military intervention was substituted with calls for reconstructing Afghanistan. This “moved beyond humanitarian action to a comprehensive, if at times distorted and poorly co-ordinated programme of state-building” (Rubin, 2006, 176). This new state-building project was imposed without considering cultural norms and local actors. Moreover, with the decades long war in Afghanistan, most of the country’s infrastructure was destroyed, being necessary to rebuild hospitals, schools, roads, bridges, power supplies, etc. The data differs: while according to the Costs of War Project at Brown University, the US alone spent 2.313 trillion dollars on the war in Afghanistan, the numbers provided by Thrall and Goepner, for instance, state that since 2001 the US spent 104 billion dollars to rebuild Afghanistan (2017, 5).

¹ Coalition of militias in Afghanistan working under the umbrella term Northern Alliance or United Front.

² The mujahideen were a guerrilla group that operated in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. After the fall of the communist government in the country they separated into several groups leading the country into a civil war.

The reconstruction program was aligned with a political reform that led to a new Constitution in 2004, proclaiming the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as a unitary state (Lister, 2007,4). The democratization process was developed, and the country saw four presidential elections and three parliamentary elections. Yet, many authors claim that during those years the level of corruption in the country increased (among others, see Zyla & Grant; Cordesman & Cormarie)³. One year later, in 2005, the regrouping of the Taliban and the consequent insurgency proved that the US and its allies suffered from “conceptual anachronism”, starting a peacebuilding and development operation in a violence ridden environment (Branco, 2021, 29).

Once elected in 2008, President Obama reversed several measures of the previous administration, while implementing new foreign policy strategies. According to Lee, Obama shifted the foreign policy focus from the Middle East to Asia-Pacific - in a policy known as Pivot to Asia (2022, 138). Furthermore, the new administration set its attention to Pakistan with the aim to “stabilize Pakistan and build its economic and military capacity to carry out counterinsurgency offensives in the tribal region” (Shad & Iqbal, 2021, 28).

In 2011, Washington ended the war in Iraq, while increasing its military expenditures and troops in Afghanistan. Between 2011 and 2013, the US military aid to Afghanistan reached, approximately, nine billion dollars (Tian, 2021). In the same period, Obama increased the troop count in thirty thousand, in addition to the already seventy thousand in the field (The Washington Post, 2021). However, in 2011 US forces achieved their biggest goal yet, they were able to discover and kill Osama bin Laden. In the following years both NATO and American forces ended their combat missions, and in 2017 “NATO allies and partners decided to set the number of troops in Afghanistan at 16,000 personnel” (Third Way, 2020). Nonetheless, the US-Taliban peace talks proved to be unfruitful as the Taliban “reiterated their willingness to negotiate a political settlement but not with the Afghan government, whose legitimacy was questioned” (Shad & Iqbal, 2021, 30).

In 2016, after the election of President Donald Trump more troops were sent to the ground, breaking the President’s previous vow of ending the “war in the Middle East”

³ According to the “Transparency International [Afghanistan was rated] as the seventh most corrupt government in the world in 2021” (Cordesman & Cormarie, 2022, 5).

(Lee, 2022, 138). Still, progresses were made in the peace negotiations between the Taliban and Washington, when both sides agreed on a ceasefire to sign a peace deal in Doha, Qatar. The agreement stated that

“the Taliban will prevent the use of Afghanistan by any group or individual seeking to attack the United States or its allies; the United States and all foreign forces will gradually withdraw from Afghanistan within 14 months, if certain commitments are met by the Taliban; the Taliban will engage in direct negotiations with the Afghan government, if certain steps are taken; and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an agenda item in intra-Afghan negotiations” (Third Way, 2020).

However, grave mistakes were made during the negotiations, as the peace talks excluded minority groups, women, and the Afghan government, not guaranteeing a political settlement between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan.

In 2021, President Biden announced the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan by the 30th of August 2021, following the peace agreements between the Taliban and the previous US administration in Doha. As the US abandoned the country, and President Ashraf Ghani fled, “the Taliban launched an offensive to take control of the country” (Zyla & Grant, 2022, 1), which was achieved in less than two weeks. A war that cost “the US \$822 billion from 2001 to 2019, resulting in over 2,300 US military personnel killed and 20,660 wounded” (Brenner & Wallin, 2021, 1), in addition to the “47,245 civilians and 66,000 Afghan national military police” that were killed (Lee, 2022, 146), ended with the same political structure as it began.

In 2023, two years since the Taliban took over Afghanistan, the regime faces several challenges, internally and externally, from political to economic. Some of these are

“managing its internal hardline versus moderate divisions; securing relief from the UN sanctions committee; gaining legitimacy, international recognition, financial and developmental assistance, and also, to rearrange its own fighters into a formal and structured military force” (D’Souza, et al, 2022, 59).

Also, the Taliban are now facing external pressure through the imposing of sanctions. Following Kessler’s definition, sanctions can be seen as the action a government or international organization can take to force/pressure a state or group into taking certain action or behavior, through measures that can include the prevention of “engaging in trade, buying weapons, accessing foreign-held funds, and/or travelling to other countries” (Kessler, 2022, 2-3). Since 2011, the UN upheld sanctions against the Taliban, for instance, a member states of the United Nations cannot provide any funds, financial

assets, and economic resources to the Taliban, need to freeze their funds overseas, and prevent them from entering their countries (UNSCR 1988).

In addition, the US is also upholding sanctions: under Executive Order 13268 and 13224 the Taliban are designated as “Specially Designated Global Terrorists” (SDGT). In international relations this adds a new level of complexity as relations and trade with any state/group/person under US sanctions restricts the possibility of business with the US (Kessler, 2022, 7). In other words, US citizens and institutions/organizations are prohibited from engaging in trade and transactions in property or interests, as well as providing goods, funds, services, or donations to the Taliban. The lack of full clarity of what is or is not allowed stops humanitarian aid from reaching Afghanistan, as NGOs need to interact with all parties, including the Taliban, to access vulnerable populations (Eckert, 2021, 6).

All of this is exacerbated by the freezing of assets of the Central Bank of Afghanistan overseas. For instance, the US has frozen “10 billion US dollars in assets” (Essar, et al, 2022, 1), further crippling the Afghan economy, with food prices increasing more than 50% (Eckert, 2021, 3). This not only caused the collapse of the banking and financial system, but also led to a shortage of cash in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the World Bank, the IMF and the EU have stopped aid projects and funding to the country (Kessler, 2022; Modebadze, 2022), which consisted of the majority of Afghan GDP.

Now, once again, politicians and academics alike, claim that these assets can be used to influence the Taliban to protect the rights of women and children – “the assets should be used to ensure that females are allowed to pursue education and work in careers of their choosing” (Essar, et al, 2022, 3), in a discourse that remains similar to the narratives disseminated in 2001 which justified the military invasion of Afghanistan. This shows a neo-colonial and imperialistic stance as a foreign and powerful country can interfere and withhold assets that could help a nation in need with assets that belong to its people (Essar, et all, 2022, 3). While these measures can seem to be affecting the regime, the most affected is the civilian population since the already harsh circumstances in the country only seem to worsen as poverty levels rise.

Chapter 2: The Impact of Gendered Orientalist Discourse on Afghan Women During the War on Terror

2.1 War on Terror: meanings and consequences

The War on Terror emerged as a US policy after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. During the years, several US administrations have framed the concept and integrated it in the mainstream dialogue. As it was “socially shared” the concept now works “symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese and Lewis, 2009, 777), influencing its perception.

The policy diverges from conventional warfare, seen as a “state of open, armed, often prolonged conflict among nations, states, or parties (Jeffords, 2014), since the War on Terror can be associated with a “condition of active antagonism or contention” (Jeffords, 2014) in an asymmetrical war, not having a “‘front’, identifiable armies, or fixed duration” (Reese and Lewis, 2009, 780). Moreover, the War on Terror as a policy “opposes a ‘tactic’, has no clear measure of success, privileges the state and the status quo – who ‘we’ are vs. who ‘they’ are” (Reese and Lewis, 2009, 781).

While the beginning of the War on Terror had clear bipartisan support, the opinions in academia regarding the decision to begin such a war are divergent. According to Smith, the reaction of President Bush regarding the invasion of Afghanistan was understandable, as a measure to assert the US as strong, and still a superpower in the world, reminiscent from the Cold War struggle (Smith, 2009, 4). Stohl, however, claims that the Bush’s administration response to 9/11 was concentrated on military power, because it pursued “a warfighting rather than criminal justice approach to counterterrorism” (Stohl, 2008, 4), strategy that “does not recognize the difference between terrorism and other forms of violence in that it does not recognize the core communicative role that the violence of terrorism and counterterrorism plays” (Stohl, 2008, 5).

Still, the War on Terror did not come without criticism, as Stohl mentions three main critiques: “the war in Iraq, the mismanagement of the wars, [and] the division between terrorists and the targets appointed by the administration” (Stohl, 2008, 4). In the War on Terror, the initial support rapidly dissipated, “[declining] more steeply for Iraq than for Afghanistan” (Jacobson, 2009, 10). In Afghanistan, the support was significant considering it was a direct retaliation for the terrorist attack in the same year. However, the economic expenditures and increasing casualties affected public opinion. With a shift in public opinion, the legitimacy of the war under international law was questioned:

“Following the Vietnam doctrine, the George Bush administration seems to believe that it is necessary to violate all democratic norms in order to bring democracy in west Asia” (Rajwade, 2006, 4863).

Moreover, Smith highlights the fact that the US response to the terror attacks on American soil ostracized important groups in the conversation, such as Arabs or Muslims (Smith, 2009, 4) particularly at home where the perception of Muslims changed, being associated with the enemy:

“In weeks, months, and years after 9/11, hate crimes, workplace discrimination, bias incidents, and airline discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans increased exponentially. According to the FBI, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims multiplied by 1,600 percent from 2000 to 2001” (Alsultany, 2021, 161).

Whereas political discourse emphasized the idea that Islam and Al-Qaeda were different, Muslims were still affected by policies such as the Patriot Act, “subjecting Muslims to new levels of scrutiny, and new Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) regulations would lead to the arrest of Muslims numbering in the thousands” (Ahmed, 2011, 193).

In addition, western countries’ methods in the war were also criticized, with “kidnapping, imprisonment without trial, torture, censorship and invasion of privacy” (Smith, 2009, 5) being used, particularly when it comes to the use of the Guantanamo Bay prison.

All these aspects led to the question: Could this war be solved differently? A military response to an economic and social issue, not understanding the grievances in the Middle East, while employing an approach that “adopted favored hawks, covert agencies, masculinists and the patriotic” (Smith, 2009, 4), seems to indicate that the only aspect in question was revenge, as Smith notes: “We have joined a posse dedicated to vengeance dressed up as justice” (2009, 4).

Yet, the question remains, what was the best solution or course of action after the terrorist attacks of 9/11? Smith mentions that the military approach should have put aside altogether and focus on an “ethical foreign policy and then ensure that the military is employed to achieve the aims of that policy” (Smith, 2009, 8), in other words, the sole focus on military expenditure and military interventions accelerates violence, while worsening inequality (Smith, 2009. 9).

2.2 Legitimization of military intervention and women’s rights

2.2.1 Gendered Orientalism

The notion of Orientalism has its background in colonialist ideas disseminated throughout the XVIII and the XIX centuries. That production of knowledge led to a power asymmetry where the Occident's discourse exerted authority and legitimacy over the Orient (Said, 2003; Khalid, 2017), through a dichotomous comparison between the East and the West. These productions led to the creation of an academic field directed at the study of the Orient (Khalid, 2017, 19), known as Orientalism. While this first connection took place between France and Britain and, as described by Said, "India and the Bible lands" (Said, 2003, 4), after 1945, with the end of the Second World War, and the emergence of the US as a homogenous world power, Washington also developed an Orientalist discourse addressing, particularly Islam and Muslim countries.

The first images and descriptions of the Orient did not mention women, instead focused on binary oppositions, where the "superior" West represented civilization, rationalism, morality, and Christianity, while, the East, seen as inferior, was described as backward, irrational, and barbaric (Khalid, 2017; Said, 2003). When women began to be described they were seen as "both as object of desire and a repressed maiden in need of rescue" (Zine, 2002, 10). The representation of the foreign woman, also seen as the Other, created a new category in orientalist narratives, known as gendered orientalism, where the demarcations of gender ideology contributed to binary constructions with women at its core.

However, how can gendered orientalism, a notion that emerged in the XVIII century, have its impact in contemporary history? After the terrorist attacks on US soil on 9/11, a gender-based discourse was predominant in American media, and political institutions. According to Khalid, the War on Terror led to the emergence of two main notions that separated the United States and the terrorists that attacked the US: civilization, and barbarity (2017, 2). Dag Tuastad claims, in a new orientalist approach particular in the US, that these binaries have another function, to claim that the Middle East and the countries present there are inheritably violent, barbaric, uncivilized, "glossing over historically, politically, and economically specific explanations for events (especially violent events)" (in Khalid, 2017, 25).

By analyzing speeches produced by former President Bush, Khalid highlights, further, that the fight was not only against terrorism, but also against "barbaric behavior,

people that hate freedom and hate what we stand for” (Khalid, 2017, 2), beginning a division between us, the US together with its allies, and them, the terrorist groups, and its supporters. During the Bush’s administration that meant that Islam was associated with the enemy, as anti-America. An example of this is seen on a presidential speech on October 11, 2001, when Bush stated: “How do I respond when I see that in some Islamic countries there is a vitriolic hatred for America?” (in Jabbra, 2006, 243).

Furthermore, the President’s speeches also emphasized the need to save the Afghan people, particularly women, from the brutal Taliban regime, to justify the military occupation of Afghanistan:

“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 (2001n)” (in Khalid, 2017, 103).

Moreover, former first lady, Laura Bush’s speeches have also been deeply analyzed, particularly her radio address to the nation on November 17, 2001. Bush’s speech worked to legitimize the military intervention in Afghanistan through the enforcement of discourse categories connected with orientalist views. The radio address called out the Taliban oppression of women while, as Abu-Lughod states, blurring the enemy by the constant change between the term Taliban and terrorists from Al-Qaeda. More than that, by homogenizing women’s struggles in Afghanistan it worked to justify the foreign military intervention by the association of Afghan women with victims and the US forces as liberators, saving women from the “barbarity of the ‘enemy Other’” (Khalid, 2017, 82). Other authors, such as Shepherd, Ayotte, and Husain, claim that the address had a gendered perspective, as the use of a female speaker in the radio address intensifies the feeling of persuasion for the military intervention since women are stereotyped as peaceful and nonviolent, “when a woman advocated violence, supposedly there must be no other recourse” (Ayotte & Husain, 2005, 123).

In the War on Terror, the divergent descriptions can be extrapolated to the gendered context, while Muslim or Arab men are seen as aggressive and oppressive, Muslim or Arab women are oppressed and voiceless. Still, these definitions oppose the mirroring concepts in a western framework, which means, that Muslim men appear as the opposite of American men, and Muslim women appear as the opposite of American women (Khalid, 2017, 82). Nonetheless, the enemy, “specifically male, possessing an

aggressive masculinity, threatening to “civilized nations”, irrational and unpredictable” (Khalid, 2017, 99) is ambiguous, it does not have a defined identity, as terrorism and terrorists are not a specific opponent.

Following this perspective, Nancy Jabbra (2006) identified three tropes that illustrate the contrast between binaries in the War on Terror narratives. The first trope opposes emancipated and liberated American/Western women with Muslim and Middle Eastern women who are “oppressed, repressed, suppressed, voiceless, faceless, without agency or action” (2006, 240). The second regards American male sexuality with Arab male sexuality, to connect Arab male sexuality with feminine characteristics. Lastly, the third trope opposes “innocent and good Americans with evil, violent, savage Arabs” (2006, 239).

Thus, the creation of these stereotypes led to the idea that it was necessary to save Afghan women, victims of the horrific regime of the Taliban, even if “the best way to alleviate women’s suffering during the intervention in Afghanistan would have been through political dialogue, not asymmetric warfare” (Connah, 2021, 76). The US and its allies, emerged as saviors, a model for other nations based on notions of democratic liberty (Khalid, 2017, 41). While the representations of Afghan women are, as mentioned by Ayotte and Husain, deeply paternalistic and a reflection of neocolonial ideas, depriving women of a voice, homogenizing women, and their struggles as a mere fight against extremist religious fundamentalism.

Moreover, to achieve the binary between victim and savior was

“required the exclusion of performances of femininity that allowed for the valorization of female agency. ‘What good is it to flaunt images of Afghan women marching militantly with fists in the air, carrying banners about freedom, democracy, and secular government? Those women wouldn’t need saving’” (Kolhatkar, 2002, in Shepherd, 2006, 27).

This was highlighted by the contrast between Muslim women and western women, who are “educated, [-] modern, [and in] control over their bodies and sexualities (Khalid, 2017, 107). This was achieved, then, through the promotion of images of the US as saviors rooted in the feminist rhetoric, omitting the fact that President Bush never ran for office under a feminist banner.

This perspective can be emphasized when one looks for feminist movements in the region, which faced challenges and criticism if they condemned the military

occupation in their home country or if they advocate for the use of the veil, being connected with misogyny and anti-feminism. The only accepted view of Islam is a liberal Islam which incorporates western principles. Hence, feminist movements and groups in the Middle East are

“caught between the sometimes incompatible projects of representing Middle East women as complex agents (that is, not as passive victims of Islamic or "traditional" culture), mostly to the West, and advocating their rights at home, which usually involves a critique of local patriarchal structures” (Abu-Lughod, 2001, 107).

Some groups/movements, such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), however, were able to break free from these impositions not only criticizing religious fundamentalism and the misogyny behind the imposition of the burqa in Afghanistan, but also criticizing the US intervention in the country and the “US-backed Northern Alliance equally detrimental to women’s advancement and equality” (Rich, 2014, 5).

The discourse perpetuated by several US administrations holds power against representations and knowledge of the Middle East, in a representation comparable to the first written depictions of the East by colonial powers.

“It is not just that US discourse manipulates and deploys [-] orientalist representations, but that the racist, gendered, and sexist representational practices that are deeply embedded in mainstream US discourse enables the currency of orientalist knowledge about the East” (Khalid, 2017, 26).

In the case of Afghanistan, the discourse was an illustration of what Indian philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states being “white man saving brown women from brown men” (1994, 93).

2.2.2 The Veil as Form of Oppression

In this narrative, the ultimate symbol of the subjugation women faced in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East in general, was the veil. The Taliban’s imposition of the burqa on women created, in the West, a demonization of such clothing item, neglecting all the history and culture associated with the garment. Abu-Lughod states that the act of covering became associated with subjugation and oppression to the point where the thought that the usage of a veil as a voluntary act did not exist (2013, 17).

More than that, several arguments were made against the use of a simple garment, as Rasheed presents:

“(1) the veil shows the Muslim women’s refusal to integrate into society in the broader sense, (2) such clothing testifies to a woman’s oppression, (3) displaying religious symbols is an affront to secular societies, and (4) in public settings such as schoolrooms and courthouses, wearing a veil can intimidate pupils or juries” (Rasheed, 2014, 6).

Still, and directly addressing the imposition to wear the burqa in Afghanistan is important to note that the Taliban did not create the burqa or the hijab, as these covering styles have a proper history and cultural significance. Abu-Lughod mentions that the burqa “was a local form of covering that Pashtun women⁴ in one region wore when they went out” (2013, 35), later appropriated by the Taliban, given its religious connotations erasing several styles of veiling that were traditional of different groups and ethnicities in the country.

As the burqa became to be a symbol for all the violence women faced at the hands of the Taliban, and as a symbol for the homogenization of Muslim women, the discourses around it denote colonial narratives in which “women’s status as objects remains fixed since they are denied the power to speak of differences, their placement in the existing first/third-world imperialistic order secured” (Ayotte & Husain, 2005, 118).

2.3 Structural Violence in a conflict zone: Afghanistan

In the context of Afghanistan different forms of violence were exercised against women, not only during the Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001, but also during the years marked by international presence in the country, as “studies from other settings have shown that living in conflict settings significantly increases the likelihood that women will experience gendered forms of violence” (Mannell et al, 2021, 1863). According to Galtung (1969), violence can be distinguished between physical and psychological, negative and positive, regarding the existence of an object hurt, concerning the existence of a subject who acts, between intended or unintended, and, lastly between violence that is manifest or latent. To further understand these concepts, it is important to address their meanings: while the separation between physical and psychological violence has a broad understanding, other forms of violence are not often discussed.

While negative violence or negative peace can be described as the absence of war or harm, positive violence works in a way that conducts the object of the violence into

⁴ Pashtuns are one of many ethnic groups in Afghanistan, as the country is composed of at least 14 different ethnicities, according to the Afghan Constitution in place since 2004 (Article 4).

acting as the perpetrator intends (Galtung, 1969, 170). Regarding violence when an object is hurt, while it can occur on an individual base, it can, also, exist in a national or international stance: for instance, if in a war infrastructure is destroyed it falls under this specific category. Concerning violence that can occur when no subject is involved, Galtung calls it truncated violence. This violence is also addressed as structural as is “built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life changes” (Galtung, 1969, 171). The next binary group, intended and unintended violence, correlates with the idea of structural violence, since if violence is unintended, or unintentional it is not easily noticed (Galtung, 1969, 172). Finally, according to the author, manifest violence is perceptible and visible, latent violence is not observable, or it is harder to detect (ibid).

According to Paul Farmer (2010), structural violence is related to structural poverty and inequality (2010, 293), “embedded in the economic organizations or our social world” (Farmer, 2010, 378). These structures create a “disparate access to resources, political power, education, and health care” (Farmer, 2010, 378). In other words, structural violence can be understood as the “systemic prevention of opportunities through social, political and economic deprivation” (Davies, 2016, 1).

Unfortunately, in the context of Afghanistan women have been facing different forms of violence for decades, such as physical, psychological, sexual, gender-based violence. Yet the case of violence against women in Afghanistan is also structural as it is truncated, unintended, and latent violence. That violence was present not only during the Taliban regime in the 90s, but also during the years of the Northern Alliance government backed by the US and its allies.

It is important to address that before the War on Terror began and the Taliban consolidated power, the US had an impact in the emergence of this group during the Cold War, yet the US never took responsibility for it, as Afghanistan worked as a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, however, “various resistance groups began to organize themselves” (Edwards, 2010, 7) against the invaders; these were called the mujahideen, trained and funded by the US, Pakistan (Samar, 2019,148) and Saudi Arabia (Kolhatkar, 2002, 15).

The Soviets were defeated in 1989, however “the economy was now based on drugs, the country was flooded with weapons, [-] Afghan civil society had been

decimated” (Edwards, 2010, 8) and the mujahideen, now heavily armed, turned on each other leading the country into a civil war. “An estimated 45,000 civilians were killed in Kabul alone during that period” (Kolhatkar, 2002, 17). In this context, the Taliban emerged establishing order and rising to power in Afghanistan in 1996. Nonetheless, after 9/11, the media and political discourses focused more on the cultural and religious background that led to that emergence and less on the history and foreign intervention’s responsibility.

In general terms, the intervention had several issues from insufficient funding for the peace and state-building mission, to a lack of human resources and knowledge regarding the country and its specificities (Zyla & Grant, 2022, 1). Furthermore, after the Taliban were taken out of power and a new Government was put into place, women were still affected by several decisions that were meant to “help” them, as the security of the country was not guaranteed. Ahmed notes that all the lives lost in Afghanistan and Iraq, including of women and children that the US claimed to fight so hard to protect, were not considered, and became mere collateral damage, “[failing] to arouse the same furor among most Euro-Americans” as did the “individualized accounts of women’s suffering under Islam’s tutelage” (Ahmed, 2011, 228).

The numbers show that “1300 Afghan civilians may have been killed directly by US bombs and missiles” (Ayotte & Husain, 2005, 125). The bombing campaign in 2001 alone would create “starvation, homelessness, displacement and other traumas of war” (Kolhatkar, 2002, 20). In addition to all the lives taken as collateral damage in the bombing of Afghanistan, the US failed to mention that it risked “the endangerment of many Afghans citizens’ well-being through the disruption and even destruction of aid routes” (Berry, 2003, 144-145). Yet, these victims are not accounted for as “there are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be (Butler, 2004, 34).

Additionally, and regarding security reforms in the country, the focus was on counterinsurgency at a short-term, arming and training Afghan military, instead of a long-term framework around interconnecting the security and judicial branch. Further, ISAF “remained confined to Kabul” (Goodhand, 2010, 82) as the Taliban proliferated and dominated other parts of the country, particularly the south.

It is important to address also all the problems with the Afghan government during the 20 years of US intervention in the country. As previously mentioned, the US allowed former warlords and mujahideen to integrate the government, never recognizing their previous crimes or questionable ideologies, or considering the challenges it posed to a centralized government, as these warlords worked autonomously in many regions (Veit, 2002, 9). For instance, “many of the military leaders who served as allies to the US in the offensive against Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban are the same extreme Islamicists who the US empowered during the war against the Soviet occupations” (Berry, 2003, 143). Furthermore, while elections were conducted in Afghanistan several times, both for the presidency and the Parliament, they were not fully democratic, as the guarantee of elections free from intimidation was not upheld by the UN (Berry, 2003, 148).

Moreover, the intensification of war and conflict in an already unstable nation can lead to the further vulnerability of women due to the “intensification of violence and the militarization of society” (Peksen, 2011, 456). Peksen states that “there is more chance of women’s rights being diminished during unilateral interventions, because self-motivated unilateral attempts will likely enhance repressive regimes and contribute to political disorder” (2011, 457). Others remind that living in a conflict zone can lead to an increase in gendered base violence towards women (Mannell, et al, 2021, 1863).

Furthermore, in Afghanistan “the loss of a husband, father, or brother because of the ongoing conflict can have severe implications for women’s lives” (Mannell, et al, 2021, 1868). Daulatzai introduces the idea that prolonged conflict in Afghanistan led to a transformation and damage to family structured, highly impacted by the loss of male family members (2006, 294).

“Widows in Afghanistan are customarily supposed to be absorbed by affinal kin in most kin arrangements after the death of a husband. However, kin structures have been drastically reconfigured due to the human and material losses of war and displacement. In the ensuing perilous economic situations, it has become common for a widow to be turned away by her affines” (Daulatzai, 2006, 298).

Daulatzai stresses that more than engaging in Afghanistan with the intention of saving women while employing discourses around their victimization by fundamentalists, western engagement in the country should understand the impact decades of war has on gender relations, family structures and institutions (Daulatzai, 2006, 299).

Thinking of the success of the international military intervention in Afghanistan is always associated with the increase in the number of girls attending schools - according to Ahsan not only the number of school enrollments increased by 6 million students from 2001 to 2004 (2021, 6), the number of girls in school also increased, “from 839,000 to more than 2.5 million during the same period” (ibid.). However, the data presented fails to address an important factor: how does violence impacted women trying to obtain education? While education was assessable to women nationwide, in some parts of the country the journey to school posed a different type of problem. Davies mentions that according to the Human Rights Watch girls did not go to school to prevent sexual violence on their journey (Davies, 2016, 2). This example illustrates how structural violence works in the case of Afghanistan, particularly when the threat of a particular type of violence, physical/sexual, deprived young girls of education.

Finally, the overall goal of the War on Terror was not met: the Taliban are back in power and terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS have not been defeated. Moreover, “drone strikes, targeted killings, and the enduring American presence in these places have also generated more anger and resentment toward the United States, boosting jihadist propaganda and recruiting efforts” (Thrall & Goepner, 2017, 14).

Nonetheless, it is relevant to highlight the positive impact of the intervention. The numbers of mortality in childbirth decreased exponentially from “1,100 per 100,000 deaths in 2000 to 396 per 100,000 in 2015” (Ashraf & Kennedy-Pipe, 2022). The life expectancy for women increased in 10 years, “from 56 years in 2001 to 66 years in 2017” (Ashraf & Kennedy-Pipe, 2022)⁵. Additionally, the reconstruction program led to a “greater availability of electricity, water, roads and means of communication. The growth of mobile phones and internet has been remarkable (Yusufzai, 2018, 146). According to Datareportal 2021 report on digital statistics, 8.64 million Afghans were internet users in 2021, this number relates to 22% of the total population, a 13% increase when compared with 2020 (Kemp, 2021). In 2020, according to the World Bank, 97.7% of people in Afghanistan had access to electricity; in comparison in 2001 that number only reached 4.1%.

2.3.1 Afghanistan and humanitarian aid

⁵ However, it is important to mention that after a war against the Soviet Union and a civil war, the security and stability a new government offered could be also directly related with this data.

Considering the repercussions the military intervention had in Afghanistan economically, it is relevant to address concepts such as aid and development, since Afghanistan, for two decades, was dependent on foreign aid. After 2002 the mission in Afghanistan shifted towards a state-building and development mission, with development functioning as “a ‘liberal relation of governance’ in that speaking of ‘development’ allows for power to be exercised in the act of ‘speaking on behalf of people and their rights, freedoms, and well-being’” (Duffield in Khalid, 2017, 52), meaning that discourses surrounding development exacerbated the power that the US already held in the decisions regarding Afghanistan. In this way, although the humanitarian aid programs and development missions to Afghanistan were well intentioned, the industry of aid in the country had issues.

Zakaria mentions how the industry of aid in Afghanistan withheld the white western savior complex as “short-term aid enhances [-] power, while salving white consciences but developing alternative political structures might prove incompatible with or even challenge the ways the West has built its wealth” (2021, 62). In 2010, for example, the aid flow to Afghanistan amounted to more than 50% of Afghanistan’s GDP (Goodhand, 2010, 84). In 2020, that number was still high, amounting to 43% of the country’s GDP (Tooze, 2021), yet the total budget of the country depended 80% on outside aid (Cordesman & Cormarie, 2022, 7). A portion of the aid money invested in Afghanistan, for instance, came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with programs targeting three main areas: “economic growth, the establishment of a democratic and capable state governed by the rule of law, and lastly, the provision of basic services for its people” (Ahsan, 2021, 5).

Aid flows lead to a different problem since, often, it is misplaced and misused – “one-quarter of aid goes to technical assistance [...] the amount of aid that ends up in the government coffers is substantively reduced by the fact that an estimated 40 per cent of all aid goes back to donor countries in corporate profits and consultancy salaries” (Goodhand, 2010, 89). This is particularly true in the context of Afghanistan since “the Afghan government was only able to absorb between 30 and 50 percent of the international aid channeled through Afghan accounts” (Zyla & Grant, 2022, 2).

Even programs meant to increase the skills and train women failed. Zakaria mentions PROMOTE, program created by the US Aid and International Development Agency, which “intended to help 75, 000 Afghan women get jobs, internships, and

promotions” (2021, 71), costing \$280 million, is an example of the inability of short-term aid programs to change the situation on the ground. In this program alone most of the money was allocated to “administrative costs and payments to US contractors” (Zakaria, 2021, 71).

Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology will combine primary and secondary sources integrated in a qualitative research base, supported with relevant quantitative data. Qualitative research focuses on principles, opinions, and representations, with methods such as “interviews, participant observation, immersion in secondary sources, and archival research” (Mahoney, 2007, 125), mainly focusing on the interpretation of words, instead of the collection of numerical data (Bryman, 2012, 380). This research method, then, looks to analyze opinions, values and/or representations in a social context (Bryman, 2012, 401).

The present dissertation will begin with the analysis of oral speeches conducted by US Presidents Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden⁶, through a critical discourse analysis to examine the dissemination of discourse surrounding women’s rights in Afghanistan and the US efforts to promote gender equality. Secondly, it will compare the findings with the analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with Afghan women between the ages of 20 and 60 years old (former politicians, activists, NGO members, and civil society workers), that are still in the country or are part of the Afghan diaspora, having lived in the country at some point in their lives.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an analytical instrument that seeks to examine how language can hold power, which manifests itself in social structures (Bryman, 2012; Wodak, 2001; Jäger, 2001). CDA analyzes language as a whole, integrated into a social and cultural context, as

“discourse can [...] be understood as a complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts, which manifest themselves within and across the social fields of action as thematically interrelated semiotic, oral or written tokens, very often as ‘texts’, that belong to specific semiotic types, that is genres” (Wodak, 2001, 66).

⁶ The selection of the three Presidents is based on the necessity to understand if the approach by a Democrat or Republican President would be distinct or similar (with the example of President Obama and Trump). The analysis of discourses by President Biden will be relevant because of the decision of his Administration to withdraw troops from Afghanistan.

According to Bryman, language and, in turn, discourse are always employed with a purpose (2012, 530), and as such work to define power relations. Discourse produces and disseminates dominant structures, ideologies or values that uphold social hierarchies of power (Wodak, 2001, 3), that perpetuate inequality and social discrimination. In the context of the military intervention in Afghanistan, the diffusion of particular narratives led to a justification and incentive to the military campaign, focusing on women's rights as a main aspect.

In this study, the main problem to be examined through a CDA lens leads to an understanding of how women's rights and the efforts towards equality have been employed. This means to understand how the US Presidential discourses represented Afghan women and American efforts towards the achievement of equal rights and opportunities for women in Afghanistan. The analysis will start with the identification of the obstacles that originated the, already acknowledged, problem. Here the problem can be manifested in the discourse itself, as the authors, in this case Presidents Obama, Trump and Biden, represent American interests, and produce knowledge that holds power. These authors "are themselves a power factor by being apt to induce behavior and (other) discourses" (Jäger, 2001, 37).

This framework will be applied to the analysis of speeches from Presidents Obama, Trump and Biden following specific criteria, namely, the data will be derived from "The American Presidency Project" database, and is restricted to the declarations, spoken addresses and remarks, State of the Union Addresses, and convention speeches. The research has needed to be restricted forward in periods of time, namely for each President the corresponding period is represented by the dates of beginning and ending of the respective mandates⁷. In addition, the found records will be cross-referenced with all the records mentioning Afghanistan, oppression, and women's rights.

The results obtained through this process will be compared with the results drawn from the semi-structured interviews conducted. In this type of interviews "the researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply" (Bryman, 2012, 417). Moreover, questions can be excluded, added, or altered based on the

⁷ President Obama (20-01-2009 to 20-01-2017), President Trump (20-01-2017 to 20-01-2021), President Biden (20-01-2021 to March 2023).

information shared by the interviewee. For this study, the sampling pool consisted only of Afghan women, residing in Afghanistan or abroad, contacted through online social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, or email, via my personal social media accounts. Due to the distance and difficulty of reaching citizens residing in Afghanistan, the snowball sampling method was also employed. The “snowball sampling is a sampling technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research question, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience of characteristics relevant to the research” (Bryman, 2012, 424).

For the protection of the participants, all mentions will be anonymous and addressed by numbers as in [Participant n°. 1]. Each individual interview was conducted using a particular questionnaire (Annex 1), previously approved, divided into three separate periods of time: the first refers to the Taliban regime between 1996 and 2001; the second period remotes to the time of the American intervention (between 2001 and 2021); lastly, the third moment is referring to the events after August 2021, with the US withdrawal and rise to power of the Taliban, once more.

It is important to mention that ethical concerns were addressed to ensure the privacy and anonymity of all participants, following the ISCTE’s guidelines for personal information. Regarding the contact through internet platforms, all participants have public social media profiles through which the contacts were made. Still, not wanting to cause any discomfort or danger to the participants, all information will be anonymized, with no mention of names or identifiers.

The interviews have been deeply relevant, not only to understand the impact of conflict on women, in this case a conflict that lasted since 1979 until today, but to analyze the War on Terror through a feminist lens. As women’s rights were mobilized by US narrative to legitimize the military intervention in 2001, and again after the withdrawal in 2021, it is important to have a means to understand this war from the perspective of the women who lived through it, who can describe the impact of the foreign intervention in Afghanistan, and judge or praise it based on personal experiences. Additionally, with the lack of information coming from Afghanistan on the conditions of life and violations of human rights from the Taliban now that they consolidated a government (even if it is not recognized internationally), these interviews can provide a relevant insight to the consequences of an abrupt withdrawal. Moreover, with women still fighting for their

rights in the country it's important to give them a platform in which their voices are heard and respected, and where they can disseminate their opinions and hopes for their country.

However, there are limitations to the method of semi-structured interviews. As it is the case for several methods of qualitative research, qualitative interviews have the risk of not representing the totality of the population since they are conducted on a smaller scale. In addition, working with people who have lived traumatic events can lead to memory lapses or distortions of memory, such as the order in which the events occurred. Furthermore, as Truesdell states in *Oral History Techniques: How to Organize and Conduct Oral History*, due to differences between the researcher and the interviewee, for instance, sex, age, nationality, or religion, it can lead to inhibitions from the interviewee when telling their story (n.d., 1). Lastly, the language barrier between the researcher and potential interviewees can, also lead to a reduction in the sample of study, since all the interviews have been conducted in English.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

4.1 Political Discourse in the US

As already mentioned, the present dissertation aims to study and analyze discourse, namely the production of meaning and knowledge, by the US towards Afghanistan, specifically Afghan women, that served as a justification for the military intervention in the country in 2001. For this, several speeches of US Presidents will be studied, particularly of President's Obama, Trump, and Biden.

To understand how this discourse evolved and its impact as a tool to legitimize the war, this dissertation looks to analyze public speeches of three US Presidents, two democrats and one republican, between 2009 and 2023. The period analyzed brings several challenges, as the number of materials to be examined would fall in the thousands of documents. For this, and to restrict the sample, specific criteria has been applied, as was introduced previously. These will be the focus of the analysis, however other statements and speeches will be mentioned to provide a full account of the discourse surrounding the three administrations regarding Afghanistan.

4.1.1 President Obama: the capture of bin Laden and the end of the Iraq War

In this part, four main documents produced during the Obama administration will be analyzed. These are: “Remarks at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York” from December 01, 2009, the “Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York” from May 22, 2010, the “Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City” from September 23, 2010, and the “Remarks at a Reception for Member of the Diplomatic Corps” from December 19, 2012.

Generally, Obama recalls that the military intervention in Afghanistan only began following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, while reminding the nation that the same intervention was justified under the UNSCR 1368, and as such was supported under “domestic unity and international legitimacy” (Remarks at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, *The American Presidency Project*, 2009). These statements created the narrative that the War on Terror was just, understandable, and justified, not only at home, with bipartisan support, but also internationally, with support from the UN and, clearly, NATO allies. However, Obama clarifies that the US did not seek war, the military intervention only occurred as a safety policy: “America does not fight for the sake of fighting. We abhor war” (Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, *the American Presidency Project*, 2010). In fact, safety was one of the main global challenges mentioned. From 2009 to 2012, as Obama states, the main threats to the world were terrorism/violent extremism, nuclear weapons, climate change, and, after 2010, the financial crisis that hit the world.

Regarding the project of war in Afghanistan, the situation evolved during the years presented. In 2009, Obama states that the operations have been successful with “Al-Qaeda [scattered] and many of its operatives [-] killed” (Remarks at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, *the American Presidency Project*, 2009), and the Taliban out of power. Still, a new approach is disclosed, with a new partnership with Pakistan, and an increase in the troops on the field by thirty thousand. The US military presence is seen as necessary, since, according to Obama, it brings “hope” (*ibid.*) to the Afghan people. Consequently, the President creates a discourse around the US presence overseas that characterizes the county as a leader to bring international order, ensuring the spread of American values, for instance, freedom, justice, opportunity, respect for the dignity of all peoples, etc.

Based on this, the discourse creates a binary between the US leaders and its troops and the Al-Qaeda fighters and Taliban. Whereas Washington is fighting a just war that preserves American values, the enemy is described as “small men on the wrong side of history” (Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, *the American Presidency Project*, 2010). While the Taliban regime has been described as a “ruthless, repressive, and [a] radical movement” (Remarks at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, *the American Presidency Project*, 2009) as illustrated by President Obama, it is important to note that the War on Terror is based on a binary of “us vs. them”, where the US can do no wrong while fighting a war deemed as just. An example of that is the distancing in the US discourse from its involvement in the creation of the mujahideen, and although Obama mentions the long war in Afghanistan, from the Soviet Union invasion to the civil war that follows, he failed to acknowledge that the “Afghan jihad was the largest covert operation in the history of the CIA” (Mamdani, 2002, 771).

Furthermore, this administration’s discourse always looks to separate Islam from religious extremism. Al-Qaeda is described as a group that leads no religion (Remarks at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, *the American Presidency Project*, 2009), because they distorted Islam while claiming to have the right interpretation of a religion they do not represent. To emphasize this aspect, Obama tends to make clear that Muslims are a part of the US, and not outsiders (Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, *the American Presidency Project*, 2010), in an attempt to break from the media division and the public rhetoric.

Concerning the Karzai presidency and respective government, Obama mentioned his concerns since the government, although democratic, was having political, economic and security issues, such as corruption, drug trade, underdeveloped economy, insufficient security forces. In addition, Obama recognizes that during the elections in 2009 election fraud occurred: “In Afghanistan, we and our allies prevented the Taliban from stopping a Presidential election, and although it was marred by fraud, the election produced a government that is consistent with Afghanistan’s laws and Constitution” (Remarks at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, *the American Presidency Project*, 2009). The discourse around the Afghan government is dichotomous as it is

described as democratic, supported by the West, but at the same time it had issues that fundamentally threaten a democracy, such as corruption.

Moreover, Washington's narrative always highlighted the fact that the Afghan people would need to take back their own country and protect it. Obama stresses the need to have inter-Afghan talks and reconciliation with Taliban member "who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow citizens" (Remarks at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, *the American Presidency Project*, 2009). However, the continuous mention of the time where America will leave, and the Afghan government will have full responsibility, means that the war was always lost since the Taliban only had to wait enough time to take back the country with no foreign input.

When Obama mentions the costs of the war, the only human costs mentioned were the American troops that died fighting in Afghanistan, and not the innocent civilians that died as collateral damage of a war they did not start. Yet, the President justifies this by saying that the US is at risk of another terror attack:

"As President, I have signed a letter of condolence to the family of each American who gives their life in these wars. [-] I've traveled to Dover to meet the flag-draped caskets of 18 Americans returning home to their final resting place. I see firsthand the terrible wages of war. If I did not think that the security of the United States and the safety of the American people were at stake in Afghanistan, I would gladly order every single one of our troops home tomorrow" (Remarks at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, *the American Presidency Project*, 2009).

Lastly, only one of the documents specifically mentions Afghan women and the impact the war was having on them, the "Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City", yet the only challenge recognized is the targeted violence conducted by the Taliban on women and girls who choose to go to school.

These documents are essential to understand the construction of the rhetoric around Afghanistan and the War on Terror, as two main points are stressed: the war is justifiable and necessary, not because the US looks for violence (as that is the work of the "barbaric" "other"), but because the country was attacked and now looks for justice for themselves, while helping the people of Afghanistan. This narrative also creates the idea that the US is a leader to the world and a model to be followed, opposite to the Afghan government that was facing severe issues. Sadly, once the new government was solidified in the country the voices fighting for women's rights in the West dimmed, as is the case

with President Obama, who only mentions Afghan women to stress that the Taliban were still violating rights by trying to stop women and girls from attending school.

4.1.2 Donald Trump: a shift in the political rhetoric

Following the previous analysis, this part will focus on four documents: the “Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City” from September 19, 2017, the “Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City” from September 24, 2019, the “Remarks to the Family Research Council’s Values Voter Summit”, from October 12, 2019, and the “Videotape Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly” from September 22, 2020.

While the documents have a resemblance to the discourse of the previous administration focusing on shared American values, such as liberty, independence and self-government (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2019), and the role of the US as a leader to the world, not only in the present but throughout history, with programs such as the Marshall Plan, showing that “in America, we do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to watch” (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2017), the military rhetoric employed distances this administration from the previous.

The military appears to be a model of force, and while Obama sought to emphasize the fact that the US was in war strictly because they were attacked, Trump chooses to take an offensive stance in foreign policy. Trump’s administration underlined several times the increase in the military budget: in 2019, the President mentioned to have “spent over \$2½ trillion since my election to completely rebuild our great military” (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2019); in 2020, the statement was reinforced – “we spent \$2.5 trillion over the last 4 years on our military” (Videotaped Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly, *the American Presidency Project*, 2020).

In addition, the global challenges highlighted in the President’s speeches also changed. While the threat of terrorism and violent extremism remained, other threats took the forefront, such as the nuclear threat of North Korea and Iran, or the economic competition with China (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York

City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2017 and 2019). Still, in 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington highlighted several other threats to the world, such as oppression of women, forced labor, drug trafficking, human and sex trafficking, religious persecution, and ethnic cleansing of religious minorities (Videotaped Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly, *the American Presidency Project*, 2020).

Regarding Afghanistan, Donald Trump is ambiguous and vague. In 2017, while addressing the UN General Assembly, the President mentions an agreement made in Saudi Arabia with more than 50 Arab and Muslim nations to address and stop “radical Islamic terrorism” (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2017). Among these groups are Al-Qaeda, Hizballah and the Taliban. In 2019, Trump claims that the goal is to pursue “the hope of a brighter future in Afghanistan”, working with a “coalition of Afghan partners to stamp out terrorism” (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2019), and the Taliban attacks. However, in 2020 the same President chooses to conduct negotiations with a terrorist group, the Taliban, not involving the legitimate government. Moreover, and following the promises made during the presidential campaigns in 2016, Trump states that US troops need to be brought back into the US, as other threats are more important than “policing” Afghanistan.

In the four analyzed documents, the only mention of women’s rights takes place in 2019 during the UN General Assembly, where the President highlights the importance of empowering women:

“We are also championing the role of women in our societies. Nations that empower women are much wealthier, safer, and much more politically stable. It is therefore vital not only to a nation's prosperity, but also is vital to its national security, to pursue women's economic development” (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2019).

However, addressing the issue of equality in a UN Assembly does not mask the fact that Trump did not run for office under feminist ideology, nor did he promote policies at home that advocated for the protection of women’s rights. In fact, his presidential campaign was full of scandals due to his “sexual swagger, stream of insults about women’s looks, and infamous taped boast of forcing himself on women” (Chira, 2020, 71). It is clear then that the silence regarding the rights of women in Afghanistan came as a reflection of his own policies at home.

Moreover, while in 2017 the President still claimed that the main goal was to “[prevent] the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan”, that narrative shifted until the end of the mandate. On February 29, 2020, Trump announced that his administration signed an agreement with the Taliban. This measure is reflexive of the discourse surrounding Afghanistan during the Trump’s administration, considered a war that was ongoing for far too long – “I also share their frustration over a foreign policy that has spent too much time, energy, money, and most importantly lives, trying to rebuild countries in our own image, instead of pursuing our security interests above all other considerations” (*Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia – the White House, 2017*). As was conducted previously by Obama, Trump also always put the responsibility of the country in the hands of the Afghan people, claiming that the US could not continue the nation-building process.

4.1.3 Joseph Biden and the withdrawal from Afghanistan

While the former President stroked a deal with the Taliban, beginning the talks around American withdrawal, it was President Biden who in fact left Afghanistan in 2021. Consequently, it is important to analyze his discourse surrounding the withdrawal and his perspective about the new Taliban regime and how it is affecting Afghan women. For this, two documents will be analyzed: the “Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City” from September 21, 2021, and the “Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City” from September 21, 2022. As both years faced a several challenge internationally, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war between Russia and Ukraine, the documents will be introduced separately.

In 2021, the President reminded the world of the need to enact a “global community” to fight against threats such as the possibility of future pandemics, new emerging technologies, terrorism, and climate change (*Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, the American Presidency Project, 2021*). To achieve this Biden describes the US as a partner and ally to work on the issues previously mentioned, but more than that it appears as a new leader for a new world order – “my new administration to help lead the world toward a more peaceful, prosperous future for all people” (*ibid.*). However, to focus on the new threats it will be necessary to forget “wars of the past”, such as the war in Afghanistan.

Instead of violence and war, the new administration seeks to gather a new diplomatic approach to foreign policy, while making it clear that the US has the means to defend itself and its allies if needed. Additionally, the focus of the US foreign policy also shifts into the Indo-Pacific, and institutions like the UN, NATO, the EU, the Quad partnership, and regional institutions such as ASEAN or the African Union. These partnerships emphasize the role of the US in the world as a model for democracy and an international leader. Moreover, the US seeks to work to prevent exploitation of weaker countries by stronger ones “whether through changes to territory by force, economic coercion, technical exploitation, or disinformation” (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2021).

The first real mention of Afghanistan comes when the President acknowledges the lives lost as a consequence of a terrorist attack at the Kabul airport in Afghanistan. However, Biden claims that the US now knows “how to build effective partnerships to dismantle terrorist networks by targeting their financing and support systems, countering their propaganda, preventing their travel, as well as disrupting imminent attacks” (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2021). Yet that is visibly not true, as during the War on Terror they did not achieve the goal of dismantling terrorist organizations, in fact the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq led to the emergence of terrorist groups such as ISIS, still active today.

Furthermore, Biden addresses the adoption of a new UNSCR regarding Afghanistan, and particularly the new Taliban regime where they are “laying the expectations to which we will hold the Taliban when it comes to respecting universal human rights” (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2021). Unfortunately, those expectations were not met, as the Taliban keep cutting down the rights of women in the country, with little opposition or international coverage.

Regarding women’s rights, the President states that women and girls should be allowed to contribute to their countries, free of violence, highlighting Central America, Middle East, Africa, and particularly Afghanistan as places where that does not occur –

“We all must advocate for women—the rights of women and girls to use their full talents to contribute economically, politically, and socially and pursue their dreams free of violence and intimidation—from Central America to the Middle East, to

Africa, to Afghanistan—wherever it appears in the world” (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2021)

– forgetting to mention that abuse, violence, and inequality is not a condition associated only with underdeveloped countries.

For the UN General Assembly of 2022, Biden focuses his address on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, highlighting the necessity to defend and uphold democracy at home and abroad. In addition, other threats are also mentioned, such as climate change, global health security, and, as the President mentions “feeding the world” (Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *the American Presidency Project*, 2022). Similarly to the Trump’s administration, Biden also mentions China as the biggest competitor, but makes clear that the US looks for peace, and not a similar situation to the Cold War once more.

Regrettably, the only mention of Afghanistan comes as a reminder of the Taliban repression of women in the country, a clear violation of human rights.

4.2 Afghan Women and the Military Intervention

For the sample group of the interviews I was able to recruit twelve participants, three of whom ended up cancelling or not responding back. Although I wanted to get a broad spectrum of opinions that could reflect, in general, most of Afghan society, it was difficult to find participants for the case study (not having an answer back from most of the people contacted). At the same time, Afghan society is rich and with deep historical roots, as well as diverse, not only in languages, but in values, beliefs, habits, and cultures, which means that the limited sample here presented cannot reflect the full background of these people.

With the interviews, and as I mentioned previously, I wanted to understand the perspective of women regarding a war that lasted 20 years, particularly their opinions on foreign military intervention and the new regime consolidated as a result, and how the efforts to promote equal rights between men and women in Afghanistan were perceived by Afghan women. Based on this, the main question to be answered has been the following: How did the instrumentalization of discourse in Afghanistan by the US Presidents impact structural violence against women, not only during the US intervention but also after August 2021?

Here the analysis of the interviews will fall into 4 specific categories: (1) the impact of the foreign military intervention in improving women's rights; (2) the economic dependency of Afghanistan on foreign aid; (3) the negotiation between the Trump Administration and the Taliban (Doha Agreement); (4) the Taliban regime after 2021.

4.2.1 Women's Rights in Afghanistan after the intervention

Under the scope of the War on Terror and as retaliation for the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the United States and its allies undertook a military intervention in Afghanistan to capture Osama bin Laden, to destroy Al-Qaeda, and to end the Taliban rule that enabled them. To understand how the participants understood these events several questions (see Annex 1) were designated to examine the consequences of the bombing campaign on Afghan soil, the evolution of women's rights in the country, and the division between regions within Afghanistan.

To this, the participants showed a range of perspectives, influenced primarily by their upbringing and life context. One of the interviewees, a former judge, born in 1966, was an adult when the Taliban first came to power, and recounted that dark period in Afghanistan's history and the cruelty of the Taliban, that made her flee to Pakistan –

“because of my job, [-], and my activism, they came directly to my house, they tried to find me and kill me. The same night after they left the house I escaped to Pakistan [-] I left Afghanistan very quickly because of my safety and security, like me a thousand Afghans left the country the first time” (Participant n. ° 8).

Others were children during the Taliban regime of the 90s, not having any memory of that time. Participant n. ° 1, an activist, who was 4 years old in 1996, recalls the years of early education “supported by international NGOs, so it was basically either in someone's private house or in a mosque” (Participant n. ° 1), and the struggles women faced just to go outside – “When it comes to women's access to healthcare, it was limited but at the same time women had to be accompanied by men, which was the biggest struggle, particularly for women who had lost the main male members of their families, particularly their husbands, in civil war” (Participant n. ° 1). This description illustrates a gender division, where women were limited in all aspects of life, aggravated even when women belonged to ethnic minorities.

Similarly, for Participant n. ° 2, an activist and NGO member, the time of the Taliban ruling happened at such a young age that the concept of “Taliban” was not

comprehended. The time she remembers was marked by the US presence in the country, and still, she recalled those years of early development as deeply unequal:

“I come from a very privileged background, so I did have access to education wherever I was. But a lot of people around me didn’t have that access, because of social or religious reasons, or because of the propaganda that was done about the schools funded by the US, and that would bring us bad name and the women would be radicalized to thinking in western ways” (Participant n. ° 2).

For others, the experience of living in Afghanistan only came as an adult. Participant n. ° 3 (activist and writer) was raised abroad, in a Western country. When she returned to Afghanistan, working with an NGO, the Taliban rule had been long gone. The same was the case for Participant n. ° 6, daughter of Afghan refugees and activist, she grew up in the “largest refugee and diaspora location [for Afghans] in all of the United States during the 1980s” (Participant n. ° 6). For her the Taliban regime was associated with unhappiness, as “mainly the people who were not happy were the ones living very privileged lives. It was the people that lived in the capitals, like Kabul or Herat, that were not happy because they were used to a freedom that the Taliban would not allow” (Participant n. ° 6).

These different backgrounds provide a richer perspective on the conflict, with subjective points based on past experiences, showing that in the context of Afghanistan it is impossible to have a unanimous understanding reflecting the lives of all Afghans. As Participant n. ° 3 stated:

“I think it was a different experience from family to family, some were able to get work opportunities, their daughters and sons were able to have a little window of twenty years where they were doing well, and for them they will have very different things to say than those who lived in provinces where their village was droned, it depends on how the foreign presence affected their families”.

Generally, however, the participants recognized the importance of the intervention to allow for a shift in the regime: from a religious extremist movement to the formation of a new government, democratically elected. Yet, the participants diverged in terms of the importance granted towards foreign military intervention.

Participant n. ° 8 claimed that the military intervention made some people happy, as the Taliban regime ended, being the main reason for a change in Afghanistan, a change that affected not only women but also men: “for me that was the golden time for women achievement and also for boys’ achievement, a lot of boys started working for the militaries, as interpreters and in different projects”.

Participant n. ° 3, instead, stated that the improvement of women's rights only came due to the security situation:

“with the foreign intervention what happened was there was a window created and with that security families that did want their daughters to participate in higher education and society, and there is quite a lot of families, they were starting to take a chance and trust that their daughters would be safe”

Claiming that the primary concern in Afghanistan was security, and as such the divisions between men and women were upheld out of fear of Taliban retribution, not as a direct result of the perceived “backwardness” of Afghan society.

“With families in rural or urban centers, the number one concern regarding taking their daughters, was not necessarily cultural it was security, the family security, and what happens if we are associated with foreign organizations, or what happens if my daughters is on her way to work and that office is attacked by the Taliban”.

In her opinion, the intervention did not come to change the mentality of Afghans regarding women's rights, it simply allowed them to do so freely and safely.

On the contrary, Participant n. ° 6 claimed that in the Afghan culture “the role of a woman is to serve her husband and her family, and raise children”, even if the woman has control over her own family. This means that entering a country with different social norms had its difficulties. Participant n. ° 6 recognized the importance of the intervention in terms of opportunities for women empowerment, for instance, “Parliament is a good example of how it chang[ed], there were more women parliamentary members in the Afghan Parliament than in any other country” (Participant n. ° 6), but still she mentioned that the changes necessary to implement equal rights would take generations. The interviewee stated that the rapid change “made a lot of Afghan men angry, because you are causing the family structure to change when you are allowing opportunities for women and not men”.

Participant n. ° 1, particularly, stated that the new regime based on “democratic values [and] democratic elements”, along with a constitution that was aligned with gender equality was the main gain from the intervention in Afghanistan. She stated that Afghans “had twenty years to pave the way, or facilitate, to have progress towards gender equality”, recognizing that the great efforts from the population and its government led to fast-paced progress in terms of women's rights, progress unknown for in such speed in Western countries.

While stating the intervention was fruitful in terms of rights for women, Participant n. ° 1 reminded us that the US only entered Afghanistan due to the War on Terror, and not to save women or in the name of women's rights:

“When they [were] after Al-Qaeda and their supporters, women's rights [were taken into consideration], of course because it is a democratic country and its part of their core values, and they promoted it as part of the package, but that was not the main thing. They labeled it, unfortunately, it's acceptable to say that was part of the package and not the whole thing, but how they labeled it or created the narratives around it to justify the invasion, it was part the justification” (Participant n. °1).

Other interviewees also mentioned that women's rights were used to justify the intervention and during the twenty years of occupation, gender equality was never achieved, with the main difference being between the urban areas and the rural areas: “everything was located in the center of Afghanistan, in Kabul; 99% of the limited opportunities were in the capital” (Participant n. ° 7). While Participant n. ° 5, an NGO member, claimed that the intervention led to progress in areas such as education and healthcare, that progress was not “consistent across the country”; Participant n. ° 2 stated that “women's rights were weaponized”, claiming that having access to services was never fully guaranteed, with the rural areas being the most affected: “the rural regions didn't even have running water, let alone economic opportunities” (Participant n. ° 2).

Even access to education was different in the rural areas. Participant n. ° 7, an Afghan moviemaker, mentioned that “[just to go to school] they had to walk 3 to 5 hours per day, and when they become teenagers, the family doesn't let them go to school because they could be raped by men. There were a lot of harassment that they could face on their way to school”, and so the opportunities were never the same. Participant n. ° 6 also corroborated these claims stating that “there was some real geographical difficulties to access, which made it even more difficult. [Some] locations didn't have access to international aid, as NGOs were focused on other areas”.

These inequalities were also addressed in other interviews, with Participant n. ° 3, an Afghan returnee during the time of US intervention, stating that the expat community had access to services and goods that the normal population did not: “that might mean healthcare that cost a little more, or American clinics and things like that”. This was even more emphasized in rural communities, that simply did not have access to services:

“the rural communities were most of the time completely ignored, other times there was corruption on both sides: the Afghan government and the doner communities

that made the promised access not reach those areas, let alone the parts that were completely ignored [...] It is not only a gender thing, it's an access thing. They didn't have access in the rural communities because those services didn't exist. But it wasn't like in the provinces women aren't allowed to go to the doctor and in the cities, they are, that wasn't necessarily the case" (Participant n. ° 3).

This puts into evidence what was previously mentioned about Afghans, as the restrictions or lack of opportunities did not affect women only because of a gender division in society but also because of the living conditions in Afghanistan, aggravated by long-term conflict.

Contrarily, Participant n. ° 4, an NGO member, diverged from the perspective that the intervention carved the way for women's rights and progress in Afghanistan, focusing instead on the atrocities that were perpetrated during the last two decades by the American forces: from the bombing of innocent people in Afghanistan to the employment of war criminals in the Afghan government. For her, the intervention branded as a "humanitarian intervention" should be condemned as the US

"imposed the Northern Alliance warlord and drug-lord Jehadi figures on our people. They decorated the savages of Northern Alliance commanders who had the history of killing, destruction, rape, looting, misogyny and many more crimes and abuses, as democratic and modern representatives", even highlighting the names of the alleged criminals. In addition, the participant states that during the occupation women still faced horrible conditions, as shown by "the brutal murder of Farkhanda, the beheading of Tabasum and the stoning of Rukhsana"⁸.

The topic of violence was approached in other interviews, for example with Participant n. ° 3 mentioning the violence felt in the country during the two-decade-long intervention, highlighting the state of insecurity lived by Afghans:

"There was ongoing war as much as people like to call it post-conflict, from the time I arrived to the time I left, security was deteriorating the entire time and I think I was very confused by that because it didn't make sense to me that so many countries' armies were there, NATO was there, the US was there, and the Taliban were 80 thousand troops on foot, and how was security still so bad?" (Participant n. ° 3).

Participant n. ° 6 also mentioned the bombing campaign which started in 2001 because of 9/11. For her the War on Terror in general was a surprise – "all of sudden 9/11 happens, and they say they are going to invade Afghanistan and drop bombs on your people. For what reason? There were no Afghans on the plane", and the bombing of Afghanistan caused only grief, and, sometimes, more resentment.

⁸ To contextualize, Farkhunda was murdered in Kabul by a mob after being accused of burning a Quran in 2015. In the same year, a group of ethnic Hazara were kidnapped and killed by the Islamic State in Afghanistan. Lastly, in 2015 a 19-year-old woman was stoned to death by the Taliban.

Furthermore, Participant n. ° 4 also stated that while women had rights during the new Afghan government, namely during the rule of Presidents Karzai and Ghani,

“in the limited areas of the country, women and girls could go to school and most of them were deprived of education; forced and underage marriages were a common practice; many women were raped or kidnaped, and in the majority of the cases, the rapists were high officials or linked to them; the increasing number of domestic violence against women, even the worst cases where nose and ears of women were cut or they were stoned to death; the number of women committing suicide or setting themselves to fire to escape their miseries went higher; many women were killed or imprisoned for loving someone; and many other mental and physical tortures and abuses”.

Above all, Participant n. ° 4 illustrated the illusions that were shown to the West, where atrocities against women during an ongoing war were hidden behind data that could not reflect the full reality on the ground. The participant claimed that the data can even be false, mentioning some reports made by SIGAR⁹.

The only participant to mention the connection between corruption and gender equality measures was Participant n. ° 7, who stated that “some women got important jobs in different offices, but they were given to them not based on merit, they didn’t achieve it. [...] Women in my country achieve those positions by knowing people, and because they are young and beautiful, and they could attract media”, meaning that the opportunities given to women as a direct impact of the intervention was based on a corrupt system that was not based on merit. In contrast, while Participant n. ° 8 stated that “the government in Afghanistan is a corrupt government”, she mentioned that all the achievements towards women’s rights came as a result of “the hard work of people in Afghanistan”, and particularly women activists who fought hard to spread awareness to the Afghan struggle. In detail:

“When they went to different countries they spoke about inequality, gender problems, and they brought international attention for this problem in Afghanistan, and the international contribution made some changes for the women in Afghanistan, like in 2019 the government with the help of the international community brought changes and built an Elimination of Domestic Violence Court in Afghanistan, across the country. This court was run by female judges, and the goal was to help women when they had divorce problems, family problems, etc. This work is not of the government, this was brought by others” (Participant n. ° 8).

⁹ SIGAR or Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction is an organization created to inspect and investigate the reconstruction process in Afghanistan, providing transparent reports to the US Congress.

4.2.2 Afghanistan and the aid industry

As previously mentioned, Afghanistan was dependent on foreign aid for two decades, accounting for more than half of the Afghan GDP. Still, this industry was shown to be corrupt, and the aid money was often misplaced. Following these notions, during the interviews, one of the main topics addressed was the aid industry to understand if these women saw the money being applied to important projects.

Working primarily with NGOs, Participant n. ° 3 had a deeper insight into the topic, providing an overview of the aid industry in Afghanistan. For her, the supposed humanitarian aid was “designed to keep Afghanistan dependent” on foreign help, as was the case until the withdrawal in 2021:

“But the aid system is a system, it can’t operate if people become sustainable, and everyone likes that word, to say that they were creating sustainable prospects for Afghanistan to stand on its own, but the programs were rarely designed that way, they always more cost: whether it was the army that remained depended on contractors that supplied fuel, contractors that supplied training, down to, for example, women’s programs where they were given computers, but would not give solar power energy to continue use of those computers. It seems like projects were always missing the part where Afghans would be equipped to do things on their own, and the designs for these projects would never come from Afghans themselves, it was always designed somewhere else like Washington D.C. or Stockholm” (Participant n. ° 3).

Furthermore, some of the participants recognized that some of the projects funded in Afghanistan were “fake help”, as mentioned by Participant n. ° 3, not only because the money sometimes would not reach the ground, getting lost in NGO’s hierarchical structure and contractors, but also because the goal of some projects was only to produce more revenue. As Participant n. ° 3 stressed:

“I’m making up figures right now but a donor, let’s say they had 10 million to give for a project, a huge amount of that is just to pay their own staff, their own accommodations, and then they contract that to their own sub-contractor, who then contracts that to another, until it finally reaches an Afghan based organization. And that organization cannot access that project unless they have a foreigner with them to do all the paperwork, so it was never really accessible to an Afghan who was able to build a road or teach children, they were going through multiple hands before it would actually reach the ground”.

This was likewise addressed by Participants n. ° 6 and n. ° 7 who stated that most of the money allocated towards Afghanistan ended up in Western countries again as it was assigned to US contractors. “Most of the money goes to foreigners who works for

NGOs as advisors, to the military equipment, for salaries. More than 50% of the money goes back to Western countries. Afghanistan was a sort of money washing [scheme]” (Participant n. ° 7).

Additionally, Participant n. ° 2 stated that:

“the NGOs and humanitarian industry themselves would advocate for projects to promote education, but in reality, neither side was invested in girls’ education; one side was preaching that this [education] would bring girls a bad name, so they could use that and radicalize people’s minds, and the other side was using it to gain more money, the more projects NGOs had the more money they had, higher salaries were paid, the more they could continue a cycle of the dysfunctional country where you need NGOs”.

Lastly, Participant n. ° 7 addresses a topic that was rarely mentioned in the interviews: warlords. For her, the corruption in Afghanistan and the inefficiency in the application of foreign aid resulted in a great distribution of money towards the warlords in power during the civil war. Integrated in the government, and never charged for their past crimes, the warlords gathered some of the aid money that went into Afghanistan, becoming “super-rich” (Participant n. ° 7). “Instead of building the country they made these warlords rich. They can do anything they want; they are even more powerful than the judicial system” (Participant n. ° 7).

All the arguments above culminate in one statement by Participant n. ° 8, who defends that Afghanistan worked as grounds for corruption and money making, but not money that was reverted into the country. The money was not applied correctly, and projects were built by foreigners while Afghanistan had “educated women [to] solve our problems”, women that did not need help from people only involved in Afghanistan for the publicity – “Coming to help us? [They were] using us, Afghanistan was a good place for people to make money, and politicians to have exposure” (Participant n. ° 8).

4.2.3 Doha Agreement

It did not come as a surprise that all participants shared a similar perspective on the Doha Agreement between the Trump administration and the Taliban authorities. It is common knowledge that the negotiations excluded important agents in the Afghan context, such as women (only being present four Afghan women in the negotiation process: Fawzia

Koofi, Habiba Sarabi, Fatima Gailani and Sharifa Zurmati Wardak)¹⁰, minorities and even the Afghan Government. As Participant n. ° 3 stated “the only thing the Afghan population knew about that [the Doha Agreement] is that we were not being included”, and women’s rights “were not on the table for that negotiation” (Participant n. ° 7).

The participants mentioned that negotiating with the Taliban forces, “the worst murderer of the Afghan people” (Participant n. ° 4), meant the US only looked at its interests since they “emphasized that the Taliban would not attack the American military” (Participant n. ° 4), or allow for Afghanistan to be used as a breeding ground for more terrorist groups that could attack the US. For Participant n. ° 3 the negotiations culminated in the fate of the country being dealt away: “Those meetings just seemed like people were dealing away our sense of security, and they did deal away the country”, by people who should not have any power over a sovereign country such as Afghanistan.

Going further than that, Participant n. ° 1 emphasized that the promises made by the Taliban during the “rushed process” of the negotiations meant nothing to the Afghan people, but unfortunately the agreement did not include them. Generally, the participant mentioned that all claims made by the Taliban could have been questioned by Afghan experts, including their statements on gender equality:

“The promises the Taliban made was not made to the Afghan people, it was made to the US Government, that is something we need to consider. If they had made the promises to the Afghans, then the Afghans would have definitely challenged them in terms of the details of it. When they said they promised to ensure access to education, then the Afghan would have asked them about it, I don’t remember any statement from the Taliban side where they haven’t mentioned that education or women’s rights were ensured under the Islamic framework. That’s the key aspect. If they would have negotiated it with the Afghans, they would have challenged them in terms of, “define the Islamic framework”, because we are also Muslim” [Participant n. ° 1].

Still, Participant n. ° 8 mentioned that the consequences of the negotiations cannot only be blamed on the US government:

“to be honest, it was the Afghan government job to not sell Afghanistan, when we do something wrong, we always blame others. When the US troops were in Afghanistan, Afghanistan was built by them, they lost thousands of soldiers, they came to my country to help us, to bring peace to my country”.

¹⁰ [Participant n. ° 6] mentioned even that “out of the different stakeholders involved in the peace negotiations only the Afghan government involved women in the process by creating a Peace *Jirga* composed only by women”.

For her the negotiations could have worked better if the people involved, particularly from the Afghan government's side were not involved due to their political affiliations:

“the people and women that participated belonged to the parties, the political parties in Afghanistan [-] I believe that at the time they should have asked women that had more experience and had women from different fields, like the NGOs, from the legal system, teachers, professors from university” (Participant n. ° 8).

4.2.4 How is Afghanistan after 2021?

Abiding by the previous administration's deal with the Taliban, President Biden announced that the US would be withdrawing from Afghanistan by August 31st, 2021. After that date, the Taliban took over the country reversing all the progress achieved in the country during twenty years. To understand the real conditions on the ground, the third part of the interviews consisted of questions focused on the Taliban regime and what that means for women and girls. Participant n. ° 8 explained the situation in simple terms: “women lost, we lost”, “we lost our home, our hope, all our hard work we did in Afghanistan, we lost everything”, while claiming to have no words to describe the “sadness, the hopelessness, and the darkness in Afghanistan”.

Similarly to the previous question categories, the participants agreed that the new Taliban regime is brutal, with conditions deteriorating since their takeover two years ago. During the interviews, the emphasis was on the restrictions positioned on the rights of women “the Taliban have imposed a strict set of Islamic religious laws upon the Afghan people and those rules have been used to control and oppress women and children in particular” (Participant n. ° 5).

Participant n. ° 1 mentioned that as the Taliban took over one of the first measures implemented “was to shut down the Ministry of women's Affairs and relocate all the resources and infrastructures for the Ministry of Vice and Virtues”¹¹. Now the restrictions seem to increase every month:

“they limited women's movements and participation in several activities, they limited their employment in Government organizations, and limited their employment in media organizations and private sector. And then they banned the middle school and high school, and then they went after women's higher education, and then they went after employment in international and national NGOs” (Participant n. ° 1).

¹¹ The Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice was reinstalled by the Taliban after their takeover the country, with the purpose of upholding the Taliban's version of Islamic law.

“Women and girls are not [even] allowed to work outside the home, even in professions traditionally reserved for women such as teaching” (Participant n. ° 5).

Participant n. ° 4 goes further, mentioning the physical suffering endured by women under a regime that enforces, as she states, “medieval laws”: “[the Taliban] whip women in public according to Sharia Law; arrested and tortured the protesting women and forced them to confess in front of the camera; many female activists were killed or disappeared”. Even within one’s home, violence seems to be increasing and “domestic violence remains a common occurrence and there is a severe lack of legal protection for victims of abuse” (Participant n° 5).

While the media focus on major human rights violations against women, with a deep focus on education, they fail to address the small rights that were taken away and that have an impact on everyday life, things such as “going to parks and gyms, to buying your own sim cards” (Participant n. ° 3), all of these are prohibited. In all aspects of life, women are no longer an individual, and the Taliban rules, which worsen every day, make them invisible and dependent on men: “they are required to wear a burqa in public and must always be accompanied by a male family member when leaving home” (Participant n. ° 5).

However, the human rights crisis in Afghanistan is not only affecting women, but it also affects men and young boys who are being indoctrinated and forced to serve as Taliban fighters. Regarding education for children, for instance, the boys who have access to it face “the misogynistic teachings of the Taliban [which] have infiltrated many of these educational establishments, leading to the reinforcement of sexist and discriminatory values” (Participant n. ° 5), which will lead to the dissemination of structural violence against women, as the new generation will be indoctrinated and conditioned to believe women to be second-class citizens.

It does not stop there, as “education for children is difficult as school buildings are often destroyed or not available due to the conflict, and girls are not allowed to attend school. In addition, due to the strict enforcement of religious laws, children are subject to abuse if caught breaking any rules such as wearing western clothing or talking to the opposite gender” (Participant n. ° 5).

The rights of children are also being jeopardized with “boys [being] routinely forced to serve in the Taliban military and are subject to various forms of exploitation, while girls as young as eight years old are married off against their will. In addition to this, children who have escaped the horrors of armed conflict are also at risk of being trafficked and sexually abused by members of the Taliban” (Participant n. ° 5).

While Afghan women are suffering under a regime that sees them as second-class citizens, the attention on the general living conditions in the country that exacerbate the violence are often forgotten. Participant n. ° 2 noted that the country is under the poverty line as “access to basic things like running water, healthcare, education [-] are becoming luxuries”. This is also stressed by Participant n. ° 5 who stated that children in Afghanistan are facing horrifying conditions as many families are “deprived of basic needs such as food, shelter and health care, and are forced to rely on extended family or neighbors for support”.

The opinions among the interviewees started to diverge in a specific question, regarding the role Western powers can have in the new Taliban regime, specifically: How could Western countries help the conditions on the ground in Afghanistan today?

Participant n. ° 1 stated that the Taliban have the upper hand in any possible negotiations with foreign countries, as they show no flexibility when it comes to women’s rights. Yet, she claimed that the impact of international sanctions may lead to internal pressure, particularly from men:

“In Afghanistan, men have never went through the pain women went through. Of course, it is a humanitarian crisis, and everyone’s rights were violated, and the Taliban is brutal to everyone. But if you compare women and men, women are going through much more. What I would say is that I’m glad for the first-time men in Afghanistan stood in support of women, there have been cases. It was the first time when it comes to women’s access to higher education, it was the first-time men initiated some of the initiatives to pressure the Taliban (they did not attend their final exams at universities, some of the male professors resigned). And this has initiated in parts of Afghanistan¹² where the Taliban did not expect them to stand up for women, parts of Afghanistan that have been under the Taliban control even for the last twenty years. The latest measures would lead to men and women sharing the same pain and that would lead to collective voices”.

¹² Protests have not only taken place in Kabul, but also Nangarhar, Kandahar, Herat, Logar, Takhar, etc.

She continued then by stating that internal pressures may lead to a reversal in the Taliban's measures "particularly when it comes to women's education and employment" (Participant n. ° 1). While Participant n. ° 3 does not go as far as claiming that pressure, internal or external, can lead to a change in the regime, she agreed with the idea that upholding sanctions and freezing assets can negatively affect the Taliban, not impacting the population, already impoverished and with no access to international aid. The same was stated by Participant n. ° 8 who claimed that sanctions can impact the Taliban because "if they gave money, they have power", but alerted for the fact that the Taliban will never change.

Nonetheless, not all agreed on this, as Participant n. ° 2 challenged those statements, mentioning that international sanctions are not working to stop the Taliban, as sanctions on Afghanistan are not reflected on Taliban leaders, "the way they travel, their children [...], the money they get from countries like China and Pakistan". Furthermore, Participant n. ° 2 criticized the idea that Afghan people can continue to fight and end up reverting to Taliban measures, claiming that people in the diaspora have a distant perspective on the events on the ground:

"Afghans are exhausted by war, four decades of incessant war, and migration, fleeing. Afghans exist in every part of the world because we have been fleeing for the past four decades. [-] People are exhausted, they don't have the means, people have lost seven, eight sons to this war, and they are expected to fight with what?"

Still, Afghan women in the last decades continue to show the world their strength, and even with their lives at risk they "came to the streets and fought for their rights. They never stop their struggle, even when they were arrested by the Taliban, they again came to the streets" (Participant n. ° 4).

Participant n. ° 3 shared a similar claim, stating that the Taliban will never uphold women's rights:

"they never promised anything for women except some vague statements about general rights or rights in their view of how rights should be. We don't need to speculate if they will because they tell us they will not, and they show us. They are proudly taking rights away".

Alike, Participant n. ° 6 claimed that the Taliban had time to change, and they did not. For her, it is important to "give platforms to Afghan women to speak", participating in international dialogue about their home country.

In some interviews is even mentioned that foreign countries could do more by pressuring specific points that could affect the Taliban's source of revenue. As Participant n. ° 1 stated:

“The Taliban are religious extremists, but they have a faction of them who are clerics, a faction of them who are politically ambitious, but there is a strong backbone and that is their criminal network. That's the source of the flow of money they have, and that includes kidnapers, smugglers of drugs and narcotics, smugglers of national resources, petty robbers, clean investors, and legit businesses. It's a big network that is expanding in the last 20 years, and they have investments and transactions in regional countries, like Turkey, Qatar, UAE, and in the West, including in the UK for example”.

This opinion is also shared by Participant n. ° 3 who claimed that the Taliban function according to money: “they don't care about legitimacy, “hearts and minds”, they don't care. But the money continues to come and as long as it comes no one holds leverage over the Taliban” (Participant n. ° 3).

To evidence her claim, Participant n. ° 4 mentioned specific governments that continue to work with the Taliban in exchange for leverage in the region: “the governments of the US, UK, Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are shedding crocodile tears in front of the media for the disastrous situation of the Afghan people but are secretly working with Taliban to strengthen their influence”. She mentioned that sanctions cannot work while the US continues to provide money in name of humanitarian aid that only reaches the Taliban and not the population in need: “recently, many media outlets reported that since the takeover of power, Taliban have received 1.7 billion US dollars”.

For Participant n. ° 8 the main leverage against the Taliban is that they are not recognized as a government internationally: “the international community shouldn't recognize the Taliban, if they recognize the Taliban, they make them powerful they will become more brave to do what they want to do”. She appealed for the nonrecognition of Taliban since “if they [the international community] want to recognize the Taliban, they will close their eyes to all the unjust things they are doing against the law, against international law and Islamic law” (Participant n. ° 8). However, that alone will not work, as Participant n. ° 8 stated “I think this is the time for the international community to be involved in this topic and send peacemakers to bring some changes for women's life in Afghanistan”. Women in Afghanistan need more than promises and words:

“I go crazy with “sympathies”, if you want to do something for Afghanistan, less word and more action [-] There are no consequences, just words. I don’t know what we did wrong, just fake promises, fake words, fake speeches, fake sympathies, fake friendships, everything is fake. There is a problem” (Participant n. ° 8).

After two years, however, the Taliban remain in power in Afghanistan, and the international community now questions if the regime will last, if an extremist group can ensure economic growth, stability, and security in Afghanistan in the long term. For Participant n. ° 1 the answer is no for several reasons. Firstly, Afghanistan’s informal economy is being reduced in half as women are not allowed to work: “the Afghan informal economy is stronger than the formal economy, and the women are a core pillar of that informal economy, and the Taliban are not allowing them to engage in economic activities”. In addition, “Afghanistan has lost its financial supporters, because Afghanistan’s supporters have been most of the democratic countries” (Participant n. ° 1).

Politically, the new government does not represent its people, as it is not inclusive of all ethnic groups in the country and tries to erase thousands of years’ worth of history, as Participant n. ° 2 stated “the Taliban have cleared everything of our identity, to our anthem, to our flag, to national cultural identity. We might be poor people, but we are very proud people of our 3000 years old identity. We are one of the ancient countries in the whole Asia, the US didn’t exist, and a lot of European countries were fighting for land. Afghanistan was a civilization”. The decision to create the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, as claimed by the Taliban, erasing the Afghan flag, and changing the national anthem, was not supported in the country, as it seems they are trying to erase history and culture.

Finally, regarding further security concerns, Participant n. ° 1 mentioned that “there are elements in the Taliban structure, and holding decision-making positions, who have former connections and associations with other terrorist organizations”, which creates a threat not only in the region but in the world.

Chapter 5: Outcomes

This chapter is dedicated to confronting the selected discourses by US Presidents with the semi-structured interviews I conducted, to finally answer the main research question: “How did the instrumentalization of discourse in Afghanistan by US President’s impact

structural violence against women, not only during the US intervention, but also after August 2021?”

5.1 Instrumentalization of gender in the War on Terror and its effect on structural violence

In the context of the War on Terror, the instrumentalization of discourse has immediately begun after the attacks on US soil, with narratives being broadcasted regarding Afghanistan, that were supported at home and internationally. At the time, “the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) was one of the few organizations to condemn the occupation of Afghanistan by the US and NATO. RAWA continued promoting its standing by using any tribune and also collecting reports of civilian casualties and sharing them with the world media” (Participant n. ° 4).

During the last two decades, this narrative was introduced into the mainstream dialogue acquiring meaning and power, anchored in the notion of Orientalism and, based on the principle of “us vs them”, to justify the military intervention in Afghanistan, and Iraq, and the war crimes committed as a result.

In the case addressed in this dissertation, the analysis begins with the creation of the notion of “gendered orientalism”. Although the concept is not new, here it is redirected to the specific case of Afghanistan, marked by the binary between Western women and Afghan women. This dualism, based on fictitious representations, has represented Afghan women as “weak and in need of rescue”, while enforcing the idea that all Afghan men are “barbaric and threatening” (Khalid, 2017, 8), which contrasts with the image defended by the interviewees, that described Afghan women as brave and hardworking, fighting for their rights for more than two decades.

The instrumentalization of feminist rhetoric in the War on Terror fixed the narrative of violation of women’s rights on the Taliban regime of the 1990s, erasing the struggles women faced during the new US backed government, and the history regarding the emergence of the Taliban, clearly supported by the US who “ignored the extremist ideology of the Mujahadeen” (Kolhatkar, 2002, 15).

Beginning with President George W. Bush, the literature review developed in chapter 2 showed the emphasis taken by his administration on the division between the

US and the terrorists, where Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were included. The simple narrative around the War on Terror emerged anchored in claims that such drastic actions in foreign policy were necessary in terms of homeland security and international protection, as the invasion of Afghanistan “[was] not simply retaliatory, but designed to spread ‘freedom’ and ‘liberation’ to places and peoples subjugated by barbaric leaders who aimed to inflict terror and impose their worldview on ‘the entire civilized world’ (Bush 2003)” (in Khalid, 2017, 1). Yet, the actions taken by this Administration felt retaliatory, specially to the Afghan civilians that experienced the devastation of the bombing campaign: “the consequence is that they lost their lives, they lost their family members, the appeal towards the Taliban was stronger because you have this sentiment of a foreign invader coming into your country and destroying families, so that creates more resentment” (Participant n. ° 6).

Regrettably, during his mandate President Bush continuously blurred the lines between terrorism and Islam, as following 9/11, Muslims and the Islamic religion were seen as anti-American, and as such the enemy – “against barbaric behavior, people that hate freedom and hate what we stand for’ (2001a)” (in Khalid, 2017, 2). This perception was followed in the media that dispersed news where Islam was seen as “‘the enemy’ through its predication as violent, barbaric, and backward, often illustrated by its adherents’ views on women and democracy” (Khalid, 2017, 25). These notions were also transposed into the Muslim community, seen as “anti-democratic, anti-liberal and living in societies located outside the western narratives of progress and modernity” (Zine, 2006, 2). Participant n. ° 1 challenged these claims mentioning that the Afghanistan that the US supported was an “Islamic country and the Government [was] also an Islamic Republic, and the constitution is aligned with Islamic Law and Islamic Values”.

Furthermore, President Bush propagated a narrative where Afghan women, “victims of male violence, oppressed by religious or cultural traditions” (Mohanty, 1988, 64, in Khalid, 2017, 33), needed to be saved, employing the struggle for women’s rights in the country as a justification for the military intervention, creating a homogenized concern that erased social, economic, and historical conditions on the ground.

Nevertheless, the military intervention, meant to protect women from the violence they faced in the 90s, seemed to only increase the general unrest and violence in the country. The US began a bombing campaign against the terrorist groups on the ground

that created more civilian casualties than the US was willing to admit, as US Presidents chose to reference first the casualties of US soldiers in Afghanistan. President Biden, for instance, mentioned in his speech at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Arlington in 2021 that 7036 troops died in Afghanistan and Iraq:

“Each day [...] I carry in my pocket a number of troops killed during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. [...] And today, that number is 7,036—7,036 fallen angels who have lost their lives in these conflicts” (Remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia, *the American Presidency Project*, 2021).

The number is still unclear, but authors such as Ayotte and Husain point to 1300 civilian deaths from the bombing campaign alone (2005, 125). This number does not even come close to the number of civilian casualties during the twenty-year period.

“The lack of public debate regarding civilian casualties following the US invasion of Afghanistan offers a telling example of the material consequences that follow from the realist emphasis on state security in contrast to feminist notions of individual security from physical, structural, and epistemic violence” (ibid.).

Considering a report by SIGAR from 2021, during the 20 years of intervention “at least 66,000 Afghan troops have been killed. More than 48,000 Afghan civilians have been killed, and at least 75,000 have been injured since 2001—both likely significant underestimations” (*What we need to learn: lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction*, SIGAR, vii). How can the Afghans that were the most affected by foreign countries’ actions accept that the US was there to help? “Their homes were raided, and drones dropped, and they were mistaken for Taliban, or assumed to be Taliban” (Participant n. ° 3), which only creates resentment.

In addition, as the US invaded Afghanistan, the intensification of the conflict, that had been going on since 1979, in some cases created even more insecurity for women, as many of them lost male family members, impacting and damaging family structures (Daulatzai, 2006, 294). Afghan women were victimized for their suffering under the Taliban regime, but, unfortunately, it was not recognized the struggles they faced in a decade long conflict that tore families apart and destroyed infrastructure.

While some of the rhetoric around the War on Terror never changed, the specificity of women’s rights came to be forgotten in later years. After his election in 2008, Obama shifted the focus from gender equality to ending the war in Iraq and pulling out of Afghanistan. Obama, while still justifying the War on Terror, advocated for the fact that the US entered Afghanistan due to safety concerns, not only for the US, but also

for the world. Invading Afghanistan was seen as a duty and a necessity, to help the Afghan population, and ensure the uphold of the American values abroad. To maintain support, Obama broadcasted an image of the US as a world leader, a leader that is fighting a just and justified war against an enemy that hates America and their values.

To analyze the former President's statement further, particularly on how the US helped the Afghans, one of the most successful aspects of the intervention was the access to education, not only for women and girls, but throughout the population in general. Even if the statistics showed a discrepancy between men and women, the latter constituted 22% of higher education institutions students, according to Participant n. ° 1. In general, that number totaled the 38% in students of all levels (Zirack, *The Diplomat*, 2021).

Nonetheless, it is important to mention that disparities in that access existed, not only geographically, but also due to sexual and physical violence faced by some women and girls on their way to school. As mentioned by Participant n. ° 7, girls in rural areas had to face several struggles just to have access to education, proving that a system that was trying to achieve equality should be aiming for equity. This risk was also mentioned by the Human Rights Watch organization which claimed that "the risk of sexual violence on the journey to school is a motivation not to send their teenage daughters" (Davies, 2016, 2). These conditions can illustrate how structural violence affected women in Afghanistan: while access to education was distributed nationwide, the violence they faced still constricted their access to a basic human service and need, which later in life can restrict their social and economic opportunities.

Most of the women interviewed mentioned the differences between rural and urban Afghanistan, not only in terms of access to education, but to goods, services, and aid funds and projects. Even the areas that were not under Taliban control had difficult access to basic amenities such as water or electricity, and in the major cities such as Kabul, the Afghans from Diaspora had certain privileges that were not accessible to all citizens (Participant n. ° 2).

Still, studies by Margaret Courtney Barnard showed that development aid and foreign projects improved opportunities for women, particularly in areas such as "women's education, maternal health, and women's empowerment were at the top of the U.S. development aid list in Afghanistan" (in Ahsan, 2021, 5), and it's important to note that improvements were made during the twenty years of foreign intervention. Despite

the struggles still faced, women had access to opportunities, which is not possible under the Taliban regime, as

“28% of the civil services workers have been women; 11% of them have been decision-makers serving in legal and management roles. If you look at the sectors, industries levels, women have been working at all levels and in all variety of institutions, in all sectors. That includes the government sector, non-government sector, civil society, private institutions, or private companies” (Participant n. ° 1).

However, President Obama stressed in one of his speeches that the US-backed Afghan government did not lack controversies – from the extremist mujahideen and warlords that integrated the government, creating more power for people who should be tried for human rights violations, to the evident corruption inside the government, or “the drug trade, an underdeveloped economy, and insufficient security forces” (Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, *the American Presidency Project*, 2010), which brings to question the democratic characteristics of the government.

The corruption in Afghanistan was not only denounced by President Obama and the interviewees, but also by international organisms such as UNAMA that published several reports on the matter from 2016 to 2021. In 2021, for instance, the 5th Annual Report on Anti-corruption in Afghanistan, covering the period between January 2020 to May 2021, focused on transparency, integrity and accountability, urging the government to take greater responsibility in promoting security, justice and improve governance, at a time when the uncertainty about the conditions of Afghanistan were high, namely due to the uncertainty on the peace talks, the COVID-19 pandemic, the humanitarian crisis in the country, etc. The main goal proposed was to manage corruption within government institutions, as in 2020 “Afghanistan ranked 165th of 180 countries on Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index” (*Fighting Corruption in Afghanistan, Stepping Up Transparency, Integrity and Accountability*, UNAMA, 6).

When discussing corruption, it is important to mention the aid industry in Afghanistan. The development programs and aid industry had several issues, but the main problem was the conceptualizations of these programs, most of the times developed in Western countries by organizations and workers who have no contact with Afghan people and do not understand the dynamics of the region. Participant n. ° 3 mentioned this exact issue:

“it seems like there was always somebody missing the part where Afghans were able to do that on their own, and the designs for these projects would never come from Afghans themselves, it was always designed somewhere else like Washington D.C. or Stockholm. Even if the intentions were good, it didn’t work because the people who didn’t understand the climate of Afghanistan were designing the program itself”.

This “functions as a ‘liberal relation of governance’ in that speaking of ‘development’ allows for power to be exercised in the act of ‘speaking on behalf of people and their rights, freedoms, and well-being’ (Duffield 2007b, 230)” (in Khalid, 2017, 52). Speaking for another community translates that community into the international setting as

“helpless, backward, pre-Enlightenment versions of white Western women, whose social and cultural differences from the West are problems to be solved and whose actual problems can be swiftly dispatched using methods that have been tailored to the needs of white people” (Zakaria, 2021, 67).

Other issues are related to the application of the aid funds, often misused, with most of the funds returning to the donor country instead of being applied on the ground. When programs were funded by the US government the issues were anchored in poor planning and limited time, as mentioned by SIGAR in a 2021 report:

“these timelines often ignored conditions on the ground and forced reckless compromises in U.S. programs, creating perverse incentives to spend quickly and focus on short-term, unsustainable goals that could not create the conditions to allow a victorious U.S. withdrawal. Rather than reform and improve, Afghan institutions and powerbrokers found ways to co-opt the funds for their own purposes, which only worsened the problems these programs were meant to address” (*What we need to learn: lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction*, SIGAR, ix).

Regarding this issue, Participant n. ° 3 mentioned that sadly the aid industry and system can only continue to operate if people, and in this case, Afghanistan remained dependent on that help.

Even projects funded by the USAID, such as investments made in the public health sector, that total in 1.4 billion dollars, faced struggles as the “Afghanistan’s public health system remains beset by many challenges, including the proliferation of tuberculosis and polio, poor maternal health, and one of the world’s highest levels of child malnutrition” (Healthcare in Afghanistan, SIGAR 23-24 Audit Report, 2023).

In 2016, Donald Trump run for office with promises of ending the war in Afghanistan and bringing US troops home, the discourse employed during his mandate highly emphasized the role of the military. Although the US has been portrayed as a model and leader that strived to share and uphold their values across the world as they

have been doing for generations, the new administration chose a more aggressive approach, focusing on their military power to ensure their foreign policy goals and strategies.

Regarding Afghanistan, Donald Trump contradicted himself throughout the five years of his mandate, starting with an approach that equaled the Taliban to extreme terrorists and a threat to the US, and ending, in 2020, with a peace deal with the same terrorists (a deal that only protected the United States, leaving the Afghan population vulnerable). Most women interviewed mentioned that the process was rushed as the US wanted to leave Afghanistan, and as such little thought was given to women, or the Afghan population in general. However, this disregard for women's rights was not surprising, as Participant n. ° 2 claimed "you don't see a lot of difference between Trump and the Taliban leaders, both of them are misogynistic, both believe women are objects, both of them think that women are second class citizens".

Starting his mandate in 2021, the current US President, Joseph Biden, upheld the previous administration's deal with the Taliban, deciding to withdraw from Afghanistan. Biden's discourse marked a new phase in the War on Terror, since in the same year the Taliban took control of Kabul and are now, two years later, the only ruling power in Afghanistan. At the same time, the withdrawal was erased by "bigger" global policy issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which redirected international focus and media attention.

The Biden administration presented the US as an ally, but still a leader to restore order to the world after years of catastrophe. However, the new foreign policy goals superseded the issues that the US have been fighting for two decades, the new world order has implied the end of the War on Terror, of the war in Afghanistan, fulfilling the promises of the past two US Presidents, to leave Afghanistan.

Over two years later, President Biden, who once condemned the Taliban for their extremist views, appeared on a press conference (June 30th, 2023) claiming that the Taliban group was helping the US, by preventing Al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan. While the claim was disproved by the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team which states that

"Al Qaeda is currently operating training camps in six Afghan provinces: Helmand, Zabul, Nangarhar, Nuristan, Badghis, and Kunar, where Al Qaeda is training

members of the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan. Al Qaeda is also running safe houses in Farah, Helmand, Herat and Kabul provinces, as well as a media operations center in Herat” (Roggio, 2023, in Long War Journal),

the most devastating aspect in the President Biden’s statement has been the complete disregard of the criminal actions of the Taliban, and the conditions women, men and children have been enduring in the country. Additionally, Biden’s declaration could be seen as a sign of legitimization of the Taliban as the new government of Afghanistan. Yet, it does not come as a surprise as the US government seems to only oppose regimes such as the Taliban when they are affected: “The experience of the past four decades of Afghanistan has proven that the western power and the countries of the region involved in the Afghan issues are ready to cooperate with the worst murderer of the Afghan people for their own interests” (Participant n. ° 4).

While President Bush focused his addresses on women’s rights, the identified main difference between the West (US and its allies) and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the silence in presidential speeches surrounding women’s rights after the intervention speaks volumes. The homogenized category of “Afghan women”, already blurred and anchored in Western narratives, became erased, as all three presidents, Obama, Trump, and Biden, rarely mentioned these women in their speeches, preferring to focus on the military and warfare aspects.

The silence, and consequential erasure of women’s voices, hid the violence against women that persisted during the twenty years of foreign intervention. In 2020, UNAMA¹³ published a report on crimes against women and girls in Afghanistan evaluating the progress since the implementation of the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law in 2009. The conclusions were that “while the response by the justice sector to violence against women and girls criminalized under the EVAW Law continues to improve, the system also fails women and girls in a number of aspects” (*In Search of Justice for Crimes of Violence Against Women and Girls*, UNAMA, 3).

The purposeful gaps in the history of Afghanistan and the misrepresentation of Afghan women and men (as well as of the Islamic religion) have meaningful consequences. As Berry states “using Afghan women as “symbols and pawns” in a geopolitical conflict (Amiri 2001), thereby muting their diverse needs and interests and

¹³ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is a UN mission with the objective of promoting humanitarian assistance and the application human rights in Afghanistan.

foreclosing the possibility of contributing to the realization of their self-defined priorities and aspirations” (Berry, 2003, 138). This position was also stressed in the interviews conducted, with Participant n. ° 2 stated “women’s rights were weaponized and used to fight a holy war that they wanted to justify, so they used women’s rights for that”, and Participant n. ° 1 stressing the fact that the US entered Afghanistan in order to continue the War on Terror, but women’s rights were “labeled [or narratives were created] around it to justify the invasion”.

After years of using the fight for gender equality as a justification and motivation to enter Afghanistan, women are removed from the core narrative, only being mentioned to highlight that violence against them was still being perpetrated. The self-proclaimed leaders and models to the world seem to only apply gender equality and feminist notions in their discourse when it suits them.

5.2 Taliban regime after 2021

As President Donald Trump made a deal with the Taliban in 2020 it was agreed that the Taliban would not allow the formation of terrorist groups in Afghan soil that could potentially attack the US, and as a result the US and other foreign powers would withdraw from the country by 2021. The main condition was for the Taliban to initiate intra-Afghan negotiations with the Afghan government; however, this same government was excluded from the negotiation process in Doha.

As President Biden was elected, he chose to maintain the deal and US troops left Afghanistan by the 30th of August 2021. In less than two weeks the Taliban took over the country, imposing an interim “government” that has lasted for two years. This new change in Afghanistan brought several questions: Why did the Afghan government collapse so fast? What have been the conditions on the ground under the Taliban regime? How can other countries assist the civilians in Afghanistan? As it is a very recent situation the amount of research available is still being written leaving a gap in the literature, to add to that the difficulty in accessing the country or obtaining accurate news from Afghanistan also restrict the production of knowledge on the topic.

In a report conducted by SIGAR – “Why the Afghan Government Collapsed” – the main reasons presented for the collapse of the Afghan government were six: “the Afghan government failed to recognize that the United States would actually leave”, the lack of presence of the Afghan government in the Doha Peace accords, the fact that the

Afghan government, and at some degree part of the population, wanted to integrate moderate Taliban members in the government, the “Taliban were unwilling to compromise”, the Afghan government was comprised of a small circle of individuals, removing political rivals, the centralization and corruption of the government (*Why the Afghan Government Collapsed*, SIGAR, 2022). In addition, the US also fell short on some aspects as they did not achieve “its goal of building stable, democratic, representative, gendersensitive, and accountable Afghan governance institutions”, not handling the systematic corruption in government institutions, and failing to “legitimize the Afghan government through democratic elections, which were consistently marred by fraud” (*Why the Afghan Government Collapsed*, SIGAR, 2022).

Furthermore, now that the Taliban control Afghanistan the main concern remains the conditions on the ground, topic discussed in international media and international institutions alike. Between 2021 and 2023 the UNSC has passed six resolutions regarding Afghanistan (Resolution 2681, Resolution 2679, Resolution 2678, Resolution 2626, Resolution 2596, and Resolution 2593)¹⁴ advocating for human rights and the rights of women, children and minorities in the country (UNSC, Resolution 2593, 2021), emphasizing the “importance of the establishment of an inclusive and representative government” (UNSC, Resolution 2596, 2021), mentioning their concern for the economic and humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan, particularly the conditions being faced by women (UNSC, Resolution 2626, 2022), stressing the importance of extending the mandate of UNAMA in Afghanistan (UNSC, Resolution 2678, 2023), defending women’s participation in Afghan society (UNSC, Resolution 2679, 2023), and

“[calling] for the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of women and girls in Afghanistan, [calling] upon the Taliban to swiftly reverse the policies and practices that restrict the enjoyment by women and girls of their human rights and fundamental freedoms including related to their access to education, employment, freedom of movement, and women’s full, equal and meaningful participation in public life” (UNSC, Resolution 2681, 2023).

Nevertheless, these resolutions have had little to no effect, and the Taliban continue to restrict human rights in Afghanistan every day, and the social and economic conditions for Afghans worsen. Since 2021 the economy collapsed as donors stopped financial

¹⁴ Further information can be consulted on the website of the United Nations Security Council at <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/resolutions-0>

assistance and froze assets of the Central Bank of Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

In 2022, Amnesty International released a report on Afghanistan addressing the living conditions in the country now within the Taliban regime. The report highlights the increasing poverty in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover since the country is in isolation, as the “interim government” is not recognized internationally. “According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 97% of Afghans were living in poverty, up from 47% in 2020” (Everything you need to know about human rights in Afghanistan 2020, Amnesty International, 2022). It is, also, estimated that 60% of the population needs humanitarian assistance, with half of the population facing acute hunger daily (*Humanitarian Donors Urged to Step up Again for Afghanistan*, 2022). The already harsh poverty conditions in the country are exacerbated by natural disasters such as droughts, floods, and earthquakes.

The healthcare conditions in Afghanistan are also deterioration with a lack of human resources and of aid that was “responsible for supporting healthcare before 2021” (Everything you need to know about human rights in Afghanistan 2020, Amnesty International, 2022).

Regarding the rule of law, Amnesty International mentions that the Taliban have imposed sharia law in Afghanistan leading to several violations of human rights such as public executions, extrajudicial executions, with “the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) recorded at least 237 extrajudicial executions between the Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021 and 15 June 2022” (Everything you need to know about human rights in Afghanistan 2020, Amnesty International, 2022), public floggings, restrictions in freedoms such as freedom of expression, association and assembly.

If all of this is not enough, the restrictions women face are even worse as they are not allowed to attend school at a secondary and higher level, are not allowed to work in most areas, are not allowed to access certain public spaces, needing to be accompanied by a male family member. They are facing violent reactions when they try to protest, and they are not allowed to work for NGOs or the United Nations, and this has been deeply condemned by all UN organizations, such as UNAMA.

Under these conditions Afghan women continue to protest the Taliban, putting their lives at risk to fight for justice and equality in Afghanistan. Human Rights Watch reported that after an attack on Hazara girls¹⁵ “women in Kabul, Mazar e Sharif, and Herat provinces took to the streets, calling for an end to attacks on Hazaras. More protests soon followed in Bamiyan, Ghazni, Nangarhar, and Panjshir” (Fetrat & Abbasi, 2022).

All these statements were corroborated by the women interviewed. The fake promises made by the Taliban during the negotiations with the United States, namely promising to uphold women’s rights, were only that, as now their respect for women, girls, and minorities is null. If equality for women was never truly achieved in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, now women are not even considered citizens or people, and violence against them (physical, psychological, structural, systemic) is increasing.

Even though the internal pressure from protests, led not only by women but also by men who support them, continues, and shows that Afghan women are fighting for justice and equality, far from being the helpless victims that the international forces publicized, this is still not enough. While some interviewees, like Participant n. ° 1, claimed that the internal pressure could eventually lead to some change (mostly in policies), that is still not visible, as conditions on the ground worsen daily, and “Afghanistan is hostage to a terrorist group” (Participant n. ° 2).

Nevertheless, “there are no consequences that the Taliban are facing” (Participant n. ° 3), as foreign powers limit their action to public statements condemning the regime, and as the US President has made a statement claiming that the Taliban are holding their part of the deal, not allowing terrorist groups to use Afghanistan. It seems like all hope is lost, as an extremist group that was called a terrorist group in the last two decades is no longer seen as one from the country that strove to eliminate them by invading Afghanistan.

The Afghan women interviewed, as mentioned previously, have different ideas on how the West can help Afghanistan, as the sanctions imposed, and international condemnations seem to have no effect. Participant n. ° 4 even stated that while the US has claimed to have frozen Afghan assets to undermine the Taliban regime, they have continued to provide them funds meant for humanitarian aid but that fall on the Taliban

¹⁵ Hazaras are one of the several ethnic groups in Afghanistan.

regime – according to a press release from USAID the US has provided more than 1.1 billion dollars in assistance since August 2021, “including nearly \$812 million from USAID and nearly \$320 million from the State Department” (USAID, 2022). Participant n. ° 1 stressed the importance on restricting the Taliban’s access to funds. This is not only related to the humanitarian aid that should reach the population, but the “criminal network” (Participant n. ° 1) that they have worldwide, as right now the sanctions do not affect the Taliban leadership (as mentioned by Participant n. ° 2). Participant n. ° 3 also stressed that sanctions and restriction of aid could affect the regime as the population, deep into poverty, has not been helped by those funds.

Others, as Participant n. ° 6, state that sanctions are not working. According to her, it is necessary to “give platforms to Afghan women to speak”, giving them agency over their experiences, past and present, in a situation of severe violation of human rights.

After all the aspects analyzed, the question of the justification of the foreign intervention in Afghanistan remains. During the interviews conducted for this study, most women mentioned that when the US entered Afghanistan a window of opportunities was opened allowing women to have more freedom as the Taliban regime came to an end. One participant even mentioned that between 2001 and 2021 was the “golden time” (Participant n. ° 8) for women’s rights and achievements. Yet, most of the women interviewed stressed the fact that the US only helped Afghanistan because it brought security, allowing for the implementation of a democratic government and a new Constitution, which “offered the space for women’s growth in all aspects” (Participant n. ° 1).

The comment made by Participant n. ° 6 summarized the problem: “You can’t drop into a country that has its own cultural codes and value system and say that you are going to implement equal rights or a new type of thinking, it’s going to take generations for that to change, little by little”, but unfortunately the US time in Afghanistan was always timed, as several US Presidents mentioned. Obama, for instance, continuously mentioned throughout his mandates that the responsibility of securing the country would ultimately fall onto Afghan security forces, since US troops would eventually leave. The same was stressed by Donald Trump who ran for office on the promise of bringing US troops home from Afghanistan. Biden later proved to agree with former Presidents as he mentioned that the war in Afghanistan was part of the “wars of the past” (Remarks to the

United Nations General Assembly in New York City, *The American Presidency Project*, 2021).

Conclusion

This dissertation looked to understand how discourse by US Presidents impacted the living conditions for women in Afghanistan, particularly the impact discourse, anchored in social concepts and narratives that influence power hierarchies, can affect structural violence against women.

If we understand structural violence as the inequality that restricts access to services in a society in an economic, social, and political dimension, the variables analyzed showed that during the foreign military occupation of Afghanistan women suffered from truncated, unintended, and latent violence, meaning that violence has not one sole perpetrator and as such becomes embedded in the structural aspects of society, being harder to detect. An aid dependent Afghanistan filled with ghost projects and failed programs, the lack of security that comes with being in a war-torn country, the reforms focused, primarily, on counterinsurgency and not on development, the corruption of the government, the asymmetries between the rural and the urban space, and the transformation of the family structures. All of this did not reduce the inequality faced by women in the access to services, on the other hand it contributed to their vulnerability.

Additionally, these conditions were only accepted and perpetuated due to the appropriation of women's rights by several US administrations. The dichotomous discourse that emphasized the binary of "us vs. them" perpetuated the idea of Western superiority based on the colonialist idea of orientalism, leading to a comparison of the East and the West, the terrorists that were extrapolated to represent all Afghans (particularly men), and the US as saviors, in a construction that illustrated both sides as the savage and uncivilized against the civilized and emancipated. Here women, women's rights and gender equality ideology played a central role, as women's voices were erased and their struggle appropriated, creating an idea of a homogenous group that showed little to no individualism, no action, no agency. With this characterization being disseminated, Washington was able to enter Afghanistan with limited pushback from the international community and full support from both major US political parties, under the claim of "saving Afghan women".

This, and similar, claims have been employed by the US several times in the Middle East, creating a pattern of behavior that goes unpunished and unrecognized. Washington appears to be the savior of a struggling nation failed by its own leaders, often hiding the impact the US has in the Middle Eastern's conflict and the interests that follow armed actions, or the inaction and complicity of US forces in situations that benefit them economically. That can be also observed in the case of Iraq, invaded by the US under the pretense that dictator Saddam Hussein obtained weapons of mass destruction; in the Palestinian and Israeli conflict, where the US continues to ignore human rights violations in exchange for a partner in the region; in Iran, with continuous US involvement in the country's politics due to the importance of their oil reserves; and also in Yemen, with continuous airstrikes to protect a regional partner's interest, Saudi Arabia (Center for Preventive Action, 2023).

Still, despite the negative impact of the intervention in Afghanistan, negating women's voices and encouraging their victimization, it is important to mention that their presence allowed for a window in time where women regain rights previously taken away by the Taliban.

In this study two sides were counterposed: on the one hand the narratives of US Presidents and on the other the perspectives of Afghan women, that represent the greatest achievement in this dissertation by creating a rupture in mainstream unilateral narratives, giving a platform, even if small, for Afghan women to share their stories and perspectives on a conflict that affected them and their families for more than two generations. While the international community tries to reason with a terrorist group, continuously condemning their actions but not creating any effective responses, these women continue to work within and outside of Afghanistan as activists, NGO workers, professors, judges, filmmakers, writers, etc, educating the world on the real struggles that lie within Afghanistan. While it is not an easy conflict to fix, the international community can begin by understanding the struggles from the Afghan community and listening to what they need and what they suggest. More than that, the West needs to stop looking at Afghanistan just as a country in need of saving, and instead understand the needs of its people, culture, and habits, working sustainably to implement long-lasting changes and improve development.

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Annex 1

Interview questionnaire

1. Could you talk about the consequences for civilians after the beginning of the bombing campaign by the US in 2001?
2. How was growing up in Afghanistan?
3. Do you have any recollection of the Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001?
4. Do you believe that the foreign military intervention in Afghanistan helped improve the rights of women in the country? Why or why not?
5. From 2001 to 2021 would you say that men and women, boys and girls had the same opportunities regarding education, work, healthcare, political participation, etc in Afghanistan?
6. What is your opinion on the treatment of women's rights during the negotiations between the Trump Administration and the Taliban?
7. Afghanistan was dependent on foreign aid for two decades. Would you say that the money and resources were mobilized correctly?
8. Could you describe how the situation is now, with the new Taliban regime, for women and girls in the country?
9. How could western countries help the conditions on the ground in Afghanistan today? Can the US have an impact in the Taliban regime through sanctions?
10. Do you see a possibility for the Taliban to uphold any rights for women in the next years?