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Major Research Paper

**Women, Peace and Human Security:
The Case of Afghanistan**

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Abstract

This paper explores whether the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda – Resolution 1325, in particular – provides the necessary conditions for women’s agency and, in a broader sense, the achievement of sustainable peace and security, applying a critical feminist framework on human security with special consideration for the role of agency. Through a review of relevant literature, this paper finds that the WPS Agenda, while a positive development, has several structural and operational issues, and so, fails to sufficiently challenge the state-centric, militarist, patriarchal, colonial and imperial underpinnings of the current security system that give rise to women’s insecurity and hinder their agency, therefore preventing the achievement of true human security. A case study of the experiences of Afghan women during the twenty-year war in Afghanistan (2001-2021) reveals important lessons: (1) the benefits – although fragile and temporary – of the presence of the international community to local women’s security and the ability of advocates and civil society to effect positive change on the ground; (2) the importance of cultural sensitivity and the false universality of Western liberal ideals; and (3) the necessity of consistently upholding commitments to women’s security and their human rights in negotiations with non-state actors, like the Taliban. This paper concludes with reflections on how these lessons can be taken into consideration in future applications of the WPS Agenda, as well as in attempting to improve the security of Afghan women and advance their human rights, now and into the future.

Key words: Afghanistan; Agency; Critical Analysis; Feminism; Human Security; Resolution 1325; Women, Peace and Security

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Introduction

Following the withdrawal of the United States and its allies from Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, the Taliban returned to power, collapsing the Afghan government and reinstating a “gender apartheid,” similar to the one in place during its previous rule (1996-2001) and reversing much of the progress achieved through the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda over the past two decades (Akbari & True, 2022, p. 3). During their occupation of Afghanistan, Western actors made important efforts to advance the WPS Agenda, while Afghanistan’s former government had even adopted a National Action Plan for its domestic implementation in 2015 (Akbari & True, 2022). Despite these efforts, and the potential Afghanistan had for being the “first testing ground” of the WPS Agenda (Duncanson & Farr, 2019, p. 553), this swift regression of women’s rights and overall status has challenged the significance, and importantly, the sustainability of what was achieved on the ground.

The WPS Agenda was launched on October 31, 2000 with the adoption of the landmark United Nations (UN) Security Council (SC) Resolution 1325, which recognized the differential impacts of armed conflict on women and men, as well as the importance of women’s full and equal participation in peace and security efforts (UN SC, 2000). Resolution 1325 introduced the four pillars of the WPS Agenda – (1) participation, (2) protection, (3) prevention, and (4) relief and recovery – and was later expanded by nine subsequent UN SC resolutions, including measures to better address sexual violence and improve the participation of women in peace processes, for example (UN Women, n. d.). It has been recognized as a potential tool in building a system conducive to human security, an approach to security which focuses on the human rights and well-being of the individual, rather than state interests (Basu, 2018). Although at first glance the WPS Agenda could be perceived as a positive development, there has been debate as to whether the

WPS Agenda has the ability to properly respond to women's specific security needs and meaningfully contribute to the achievement of gender equality.

Considering this, the purpose of this major research paper is to explore whether the Women, Peace and Security Agenda – Resolution 1325, in particular – provides the necessary conditions for women's agency and, in a broader sense, the achievement of sustainable (human) security and peace, using the twenty-year war in Afghanistan (2001-2021) as a case study. It will begin by outlining the methodology of this research project, including the analytical framework that will be applied to answer the aforementioned question, which is a critical feminist framework on human security, considering Landon E. Hancock (2018) definition of "agency." The next section will constitute a review of relevant literature, including various perspectives on the WPS Agenda, converging and diverging debates on the issue, and gaps in existing literature. It will cover different, yet interconnected, themes such as (1) the endurance of militarism and masculinity, (2) the protection and victimization of women, (3) colonial legacies and liberal interventionism, and (4) accountability and implementation of Resolution 1325. Following this, this paper will examine the impact of the WPS Agenda in the case of the US-led war in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. The subsequent sections will provide a discussion of lessons learned from the experiences of Afghan women, the importance of the WPS Agenda in this context, what can be done to protect Afghan women's security post-August 2021, and finally, a conclusion. This major research paper will argue that women's agency is necessary to achieving women's security in a meaningful and durable way, and that to create conditions wherein this is possible, the state-centric, masculinist, militarist, colonial and imperial security system – whose policies and practices often give rise to women's insecurity – will need to be dismantled.

Methodology

To answer the previously posed question, which is to evaluate whether the WPS Agenda supports women's agency and sustainable (human) security, this paper will conduct a review of existing literature on the WPS Agenda – Resolution 1325, in particular – comprising mainly peer-reviewed articles, as well as documents, reports and publications from the United Nations, non-governmental organizations and think tanks. These sources were retrieved through the uOttawa library, Google Scholar and other databases. Subsequently, this paper will examine the impact of the WPS Agenda on the experiences of Afghan women during the twenty-year, US-led war in Afghanistan, considering the trends pulled from the literature review. Throughout this literature review and case study, this paper will apply a critical feminist framework on human security as an analytical framework, described below, with consideration of the concept of “agency,” as described by Landon E. Hancock (2018).

Analytical Framework

Human Security as a People-Centered Approach to Security

Human security is a people-centered approach to security that encourages a shift in focus of discussions from the state to the individual, expanding the dominant scope of (in)security beyond traditional military threats, to include non-traditional threats that fall into social, economic, cultural, political and environmental spheres. It was popularized in the 1990s following its inclusion in the United Nations Development Program's *Human Development Report* and its adoption by middle powers, such as Canada (Wibben, 2016). Human security as a concept and approach can be characterized by its emphasis on the protection of human rights, “freedom from fear” of war and other situations of violent conflict and “freedom from want” of hardship and

factors outside of humans' control that threaten their basic survival, such as environmental degradation and poverty (Penny, 2018).

The very nature of human security is critical, as it challenges the foundation on which traditional ideas of security are built. However, in the field of International Relations (IR), approaches to human security can range from problem-solving to critical – a distinction made by Robert Cox (Newman, 2016). The dominant problem-solving approach attempts to improve human welfare within the existing state-centric system, while the critical approach seeks to address structural issues, challenging current institutions and definitions of security, which is believed to be necessary to achieve true human security (Newman, 2016). An important issue with the dominant approach is that by taking the status quo as a given, it has a greater likelihood of reproducing perspectives, practices and power relations that give rise to insecurity, hindering potential for the emancipation of vulnerable individuals (Newman, 2016). For critical scholars, true security involves empowerment as well as protection, in alignment with the first aspect of human security: the fulfilment of human rights and freedom to live in dignity (Wibben, 2016; Elliott, 2020).

Critical Feminist Framework on Human Security

Within the critical realm of perspectives on human security exists a feminist approach that exposes what is considered to be a crucial gap in current approaches to human security. Betty A. Reardon (2018) argues that the dominant discourse on human security “has yet to face the core problematic of human security, militarized patriarchy” – a system that prioritizes the use of force to resolve conflict, while simultaneously valuing and attributing power to men over women – and fails to acknowledge that “human security can never can be achieved within the present highly militarized, war-prone, patriarchal nation state system” (p. 7). While conventional, liberal

feminists may be content with the current discourse on human security, critical feminists are unsatisfied with its quick fixes that simply “add women and stir” without addressing the root of the issues – militarism and the patriarchy – and call for an opening of security studies that consists of a challenge to the current structure (Wibben, 2016, p. 104). For example, critical feminists understand violence as occurring “on a continuum that spans peace- and wartime” (Wibben, 2016, p. 111), and argue for the necessity to examine security issues in women’s daily lives, such as domestic violence, in addition to the gender particularities of women’s experiences in armed conflict (Wibben, 2016; Reardon, 2018). With this more nuanced understanding of security, it is possible to respond more meaningfully to women’s insecurity and achieve human security for all.

Human security is commonly presented as gender-neutral; however, critical feminists argue that it is an expression of the masculine (Wibben, 2016). The reason for this concern is that grouping masculinity and femininity under one category does not take into account the gendered and gendering effects of current security practices (Wibben, 2016; Reardon, 2018), which create a divide between women and men, fueling the uneven power dynamic between these groups. Annick T. R. Wibben (2016) adds to this argument that location and context should be included. For the purposes of this paper, “context” is taken to mean the cultural, social, political and economic circumstances in which individuals find themselves, including the various factors that make up their identities such as age, race, (dis)abilities, sexual orientation, and more, in addition to gender. Taking these elements into account prevents the conception of the “human” in human security from becoming abstract, as it underscores that the well-being of real human beings is at stake, and that what makes them who they are may have an impact their security.

The conception of security presented here, with the ability to manifest in many different forms that go way beyond the traditional military sphere, has generated skepticism amongst

conventional IR scholars. The latter argue that human security is too broad and ambiguous to be used as an analytical tool, while proponents of human security defend that unlike static and set definitions of security, its comprehensiveness and flexibility provides an opportunity for the inclusion of the diverse voices, including the voices of those often left unheard in traditional security environments (Wibben, 2016). Critical feminists argue that conventional conceptions and approaches to security, which place the state at the centre of discussions, are counterproductive. Reardon (2018) articulates this thought insightfully:

“We continue to live in a world in which our leaders, those charged with responsibility for our ‘national security’, perceive that security to be under constant threat, so severe as to necessitate the acquisition of ever more destructive weapons, so insidious as to convince normally democratic societies that the exigencies of security permit states to violate internationally agreed-upon standards of human rights” (pp. 8-9).

This form of thinking, the author suggests, is what leads to the inhumane dismissal of loss of life in combat as “collateral damage” or “friendly fire” (Reardon, 2018, p. 23).

Approaches to security that only focus on the state and the military are also limiting, as they neglect and are not equipped to defend even more conventional forms of insecurity. Reardon (2018), for instance, raises the interesting case of the United States, considered to be the most militarily advanced and powerful nation in the world, being unprepared for the attacks on the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001. In addition, Americans continue to face important insecurities within the country, such as poverty, racism, violence against women, natural disasters and more (Reardon, 2018) that cannot be resolved with military-based solutions.

In simple terms, a critical feminist framework on human security would support the following: “first, if human security is to be achieved, patriarchy must be replaced with gender

equality, and second, war as an institution must be abolished in favour of non-violent structures and processes for resolving conflict and achieving national policy goals” (Reardon, 2018, p. 7). While dismantling the patriarchy and war as institutions is a highly ambitious endeavour, it is important to note that critical scholars perceive the emancipation of women (and other vulnerable groups) from these oppressive systems as a “process rather than an end-point” (Elliott, 2020, p. 22).

In light of this, a critical feminist framework on human security is an ideal choice for the analysis of the WPS Agenda, as Resolution 1325 is an important and historic attempt to change the traditional state-centric approach to security by placing individuals – women in particular – at the centre of security discussions. It asks the international community to consider gender and context in security policies and practices, and to act in the name of (women’s) human welfare. Taking into account the emancipatory aspect of this framework, Hancock’s (2018) definition of “agency,” as an alternative to local ownership in peace and security efforts, complements well the above and will also be considered in this analysis.

Defining Agency in Peace and Security Efforts

Liberal peacebuilding has proven to be the dominant approach to peacebuilding; however, it “focuses on norms of good governance” over local traditions and culture, and has long been confronted with the issue of “local ownership,” with many criticizing the “disconnect between the international and the local” and its “top-down policies” in peacebuilding efforts (Hancock, 2018, p. 20). Landon E. Hancock outlines two types of ownership, noting this resembles more closely participation: (1) a maximalist approach, wherein “the international community is essentially reduced to providing resources, with little control or oversight into how well or how poorly those resources are used,” and (2) a minimalist approach, wherein “locals are expected to accept and

implement internationally designed initiatives, owning them only to the extent that they voluntarily carry them out,” the second of which aligns more with current liberal peacebuilding practices (Hancock, 2018, p. 21). Through these initiatives, international peacebuilders promote Western values, assumed to be universal, which “limit local choice in forms, institutions, and cultural practices, thus undermining local ownership” (Hancock, 2018, p. 22). Considering this, the author argues ownership could be perceived as ineffective and proposes it be replaced by agency, empowering locals with “the responsibility for identifying problems, formulating solutions and implementing those solutions to reap the benefits,” described as necessary to the success and legitimacy of peacebuilding efforts (Hancock, 2018, p. 38). Agency as an alternative for local ownership is a central element to the main argument of this paper, as although the WPS Agenda advocates for women’s participation in peace and security processes, this alone is insufficient in achieving women’s empowerment and emancipation.

Historical Context and Background on Resolution 1325

The United Nations (UN) has made various efforts over the twentieth century to improve the status of women, primarily with regards to gender equality and human rights. However, it took several decades before a clear link between women, peace and security was drawn, particularly in the context of the role of women in conflict and post-conflict settings. In 1945, the equal rights of women and men was included as part of the Charter of the United Nations (Binder et al, 2008). Early efforts to consider the impacts of armed conflict on women (and children) include mentions of special protections to be afforded to the latter in armed conflict and emergency settings in the Commission on the Status of Women’s 1969 report and in the adoption of the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict in 1974 (Binder et al, 2008). Other efforts were made to improve the status of women in a broader sense, such as the “UN

Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace” from 1976-1985 and the adoption of the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979, which includes provisions on gender equality and women’s economic, social, and political rights, without, however, addressing the situation of women in armed conflict (Binder et al, 2008).

Between 1975 and 1995, the Commission on the Status of Women organized a series of international women’s conferences that increased visibility on issues related to women and peace, including the World Conference on Women in Beijing of 1995, during which “women in armed conflict” was identified as one of the twelve “areas of concern” at the time, while the subsequent Beijing Platform for Action raised the “effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women” as a key issue (Binder et al, 2008, p. 24). In March 2000, the General Assembly held a Special Session in follow-up to the Beijing Platform for Action, in the course of which the Security Council stressed the link between peace and gender equality and the importance of the full participation of women in peace operations to reach sustainable peace (Binder et al, 2008). The 2000 Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations (Brahimi Report) also recognized the need for equitable gender representation in peace operations, while the Windhoek Declaration and the Namibia Plan of Action on Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective in Multidimensional Peace Support Operations of May 2000 also constituted important stepping stones to reaching the unanimous adoption of Resolution 1325 by the United Nations Security Council on October 31, 2000 (Binder et al, 2008).

These improvements were made possible by the active involvement and advocacy of women’s organizations over the years, who managed to place women, peace and security on the agenda of the Security Council (Tryggestad, 2009). Resolution 1325 is of great significance, as it:

“*[reaffirms]* the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and *[stresses]* the importance of their equal participation and

full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution” (UN SC, 2000, Preamble).

The Resolution includes 18 provisions that span the four pillars of the WPS Agenda (participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery), in which the Security Council calls for action on the part of UN Member States, the Secretary-General, as well as other actors involved in conflicts to, namely, increase representation of women at all levels of decision-making in the prevention, management and resolution of conflict (para. 1), incorporate a gender perspective into peacekeeping operations (para. 5) and into the negotiation and implementation of peace agreements (para. 8), provide gender-sensitive training guidelines and materials to personnel (paras. 6-7), and to protect women and girls from gender-based violence in armed conflict (para. 10). It is through this resolution that the Women, Peace and Security Agenda was launched, and since then, an additional nine UN SC resolutions have been adopted – 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106, 2122, 2242, 2467, and 2493 – which reinforce and expand on a number of the calls to action set out in the initial resolution, such as addressing conflict-related sexual violence and women’s participation in peace processes (UN Women, n.d.).

Together, these resolutions have encouraged the employment of approaches such as “gender balancing” and “gender mainstreaming” in the context of peace processes, with the objective of achieving gender equality. Gender balancing refers to the equal representation and participation of women and men in United Nations missions, including peacekeeping, whereas gender mainstreaming refers to the inclusion of a gender perspective and the implications for women and men at every stage of a project, including in the planning, development, implementation and monitoring of operations (Karim & Beardsley, 2013).

Needless to say, the adoption of Resolution 1325 was important in recognizing the need for the inclusion of women, as well as a gender perspective, in security – a highly masculine environment – and has made strides in a number of UN missions over the last two decades, including in Afghanistan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Colombia (UN Women, n.d.). As of July 2023, 107 countries had adopted National Action Plans to implement this resolution (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, n.d.). However, the substantial impact of Resolution 1325, and the WPS Agenda, more broadly, is certainly up for debate across academic and public spheres, the details of which will be covered in the subsequent sections of this paper.

Literature Review

This section includes a review of relevant debates surrounding the WPS Agenda in the literature, with a particular focus on Resolution 1325. It will cover the following themes, which are intertwined and recurring in the literature: (1) the endurance of militarism and masculinity, (2) the protection and victimization of women, (3) colonial legacies and liberal interventionism, and (4) accountability and gaps in implementation of Resolution 1325.

The Endurance of Militarism and Masculinity

First and foremost, an important structural flaw raised in the literature that is profoundly linked to the feminist critique of the dominant (human) security discourse is that the WPS Agenda does not sufficiently counteract the masculinist and militarist underpinnings of the current security system. As previously noted, Resolution 1325 recognizes the differential and disproportionate impacts of armed conflict on women, as well as the importance of women’s full and equal participation in peace processes (UN SC, 2000). It also encourages the practice of “gender mainstreaming” (UN SC, 2000). However, although necessary for the protection of women’s

security, problematizing or securitizing an issue is a difficult task. As Annick T. R. Wibben (2016) argues, doing so “risks framing it in terms of the dominant logic of state security, and traditional, military-based solutions” (p. 106). Because women’s experiences have exposed “the futility of war” (Reardon, 2018, p. 8), engaging with a system which normalizes conflict at all compromises the critical feminist vision of true human security. Integrating women and gender equality into activities does not necessarily change the structure of the system. Therefore, this perpetuates the use of traditional, military approaches to address security issues. In so doing, it plays a role in supporting the patriarchal system which oppresses and disadvantages women, and (re)produces inequalities.

Laura J. Shepherd (2016) agrees the current international peace and security system is dominated by militarist thinking, which she describes as “a way of thinking about political issues that structures a society’s understanding of violence through a prism of acceptance of the use of force and the valorisation of military institutions and approaches, including the hierarchical organisation of social and political life” (Shepherd, 2016, p. 325). Considering this, the belief that the Security Council could bring about true human security for all can be considered as problematic in and of itself. Soumita Basu (2018) argues that with its “state-centric nature, control by a handful of powerful member states and tacit acceptance of a militaristic international status quo,” the Security Council seems to be “at odds with human security aspirations” (p. 218).

UNSC Resolution 1325 also defines the role of women in peace and security efforts in a way that reflects and reinforces stereotypical gender roles. For instance, it explicitly “*urges* [for the expansion of] the role and contribution of women in United Nations field-based operations, and especially among military observers, civilian police, human rights and humanitarian personnel” (UN SC, 2000, para. 4). Upon first examination, this seems promising; however, this

emphasizes civilian positions, suggesting the military is not a space for women. It (re)produces gender binaries, associating femininity with peace and masculinity with war, in line with what O'Reilly (2013) calls the “civilian/combatant distinction” (p. 60). These “binary oppositions” “naturalize” or essentialize women’s inferiority, allowing for “characteristics such as power, autonomy, rationality, and public [to] become stereotypically associated with masculinity; their opposites (weakness, dependence, emotion, and private) are associated with femininity” (Tickner, 1997 cited in O'Reilly, 2013, p. 59; Willet, 2010). This illustrates the systemic issues that remain unaddressed when women are simply added into a process, because the ways in which they are integrated matters. In relation to this, Willet (2010) notes that for gender mainstreaming to be achieved, it is necessary to challenge the relationships between “masculinized protectors” and the “feminized protected” (p. 147), which is maintained in the Resolution’s definitions of women as civilians. At the same time, the call to include women in these formal positions, part of the current – problematic – security system, supports the continuous use of traditional, military means in security efforts, in addition to its encouragement of women to participate as “military *observers*.”

Furthermore, many agree that challenges women face in conflict and peace processes – as well as in security efforts – cannot be properly addressed through “masculinist” practices (Duncanson, 2013; O'Reilly, 2013; Partis-Jennings, 2017). Maria O'Reilly (2013) suggests that solutions which only end physical violence or combat in the public sphere, such as ceasefires, primarily involving men, do not adequately address remaining forms of violence faced by women in the private sphere, including human trafficking, prostitution, gender-based violence, and social, economic and political inequalities that continue to take place once a conflict is “officially over” (O'Reilly, 2013, p. 62). These narrow interpretations of peace and security only service the interests of (certain) men, and are not comprehensive enough to include women’s (human)

(in)securities, which also relates to the idea of viewing violence on a “continuum” (Wibben, 2016, p. 111), as mentioned earlier.

Critical feminists have also critiqued “quick fixes” or problem-solving approaches to women’s security that seek to improve human welfare within the context of the current security system, accepting the status quo. Human rights, women’s rights and peace activist and drafter of Resolution 1325, Cora Weiss (2011) stated the following at a conference on women, peace and security hosted by the Nobel Women’s Initiative: “We can not pluck rape out of war and let the war go on. We must not make war safe for women. It is time to abolish war” (para. 1). This statement is an important reminder, because as Shepherd (2016) argues, the focus on ending rape in war merely attempts to “make war safe for women,” and in so doing, “normalize[s]” war. It represents an effort to improve women’s welfare – even if ever-so-slightly – still within the context of war by addressing conflict-related sexual violence; this simultaneously narrows the scope of WPS and moves women further away from the ultimate objective of feminists to eradicate war itself (p. 332). The next section will address conflict-related sexual violence in greater depth, as well as the ways in which the international community’s overwhelming focus on this issue can contribute to upholding the patriarchy and undermining women’s emancipation.

The Protection and Victimization of Women

Another important issue raised in the literature is how the prioritization of the “protection” pillar of Resolution 1325, particularly when it comes to conflict-related sexual violence, restricts the scope of the WPS Agenda, subordinating women in the process. While certain feminist scholars perceive the adoption of Resolution 1325 as going beyond recognizing women as victims and emphasize its efforts to increase their role in peacebuilding processes and negotiations (Binder et al., 2008), others have taken a more critical, nuanced stance. Niamh Reilly (2018), for instance,

argues that the overemphasis on ending impunity of conflict-related sexual violence in the WPS Agenda undermines the endeavour to present women as more than this – as agents of change. UN SC Resolution 1325 briefly mentions conflict-related sexual violence when:

“*[Calling]* on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict; [and] *[Emphasizing]* “the responsibility of all States to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes including those relating to sexual and other violence against women and girls” (UN SC, 2000, paras. 10-11).

It is understood that conflict-related sexual violence is an important source of insecurity that cannot be ignored, especially since UN peacekeepers have been identified as perpetrators of sexual exploitation and abuse in their operations, and have not been properly held accountable (Westendorf & Searle, 2017). This, Westendorf and Searle (2017) argue, not only undermines the legitimacy of peace and security operations, but also betrays the trust of local communities. However, feminist scholars have highlighted that conflict-related sexual violence often takes precedence over other issues related to peace and security (Ellerby, 2013; Kreft, 2017; Reilly, 2018; Shepherd, 2016; Weiss, 2011). This reinforces the subordination of women as victims, rather than agents of change, deepening the gender divide of women as “helpless victims” in need of protection, and men as “heroic warriors” and “protectors of women” (O’Reilly, 2013). Reilly (2018) notes the influence of the United Nations’ Protection of Civilians (POC) Agenda on the WPS Agenda, particularly in paragraph 9 of Resolution 1325 that “calls upon all parties to armed conflict to respect fully international law applicable to the rights and protection of women and

girls, especially as civilians,” which emphasizes women as civilians in need of protection and encourages a focus on conflict-related sexual violence (p. 633).

Since the adoption of Resolution 1325, a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions were adopted to address conflict-related sexual violence specifically, several of which were also part of the POC Agenda, which has contributed to a shift in focus away from the broader purpose of the WPS Agenda onto a very particular issue, impeding the overall progress of Resolution 1325 (Reilly, 2018). The co-existence of the WPS and POC agendas blurs priorities, and their overlap on the issue of conflict-related sexual violence places women under the same category as children and civilians, suggesting that they are all (equal) victims in need of protection. On a similar note, Soumita Basu (2018) argues that this tendency to group women and children together as if they have the same needs is paternalistic and “infantilizes” women (p. 289). This portrayal of women as vulnerable undermines their abilities to act as active contributors to peace and security efforts.

On the other hand, Reilly (2018) maintains that the link between the POC and WPS agendas was actually part of a greater strategy that successfully put gender and women at the centre of conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding discussions. This is a stark reflection of the power of global gender hierarchies, as this suggests that the image of women as objects of peace and security has proven to be most palatable for the international community than one of women acting as subjects – being treated as equals to men, able to take control of their own destinies. The repercussions of the acceptance of the international community to prioritize women on these terms has counteracted efforts to bolster women’s agency. In relation to this, Anne-Kathrin Kreft (2017), for instance, examines the extent of gender mainstreaming in United Nations peacekeeping mandates between 1948 and 2014, and found that gender-mainstreamed mandates were more

likely in conflicts with higher levels of sexual violence, which signifies the international community's understanding of the latter as a priority over other sources of women's insecurity. Similarly, Nadine Puechguirbal's (2010) discourse analysis of the language of UN documents pertaining to peace operations found that women are most often described as vulnerable individuals, "[perpetuating] stereotyping language" that "removes women's agency and maintains them in the subordinated position of victims," reinforcing the idea that agency is "mainly masculine" (pp. 172-173).

Colonial Legacies and Liberal Interventionism

Many scholars agree that the end of the Cold War sparked important changes in the security environment, shifting the nature of conflict from primarily interstate to intrastate, with civilians being increasingly targeted and used as weapons of war. This led to the emergence of broader and more diverse definitions of security, including human security (Tryggestad, 2009; Welsh, 2018; Willet, 2010). As Torunn L. Tryggestad (2009) notes, greater emphasis was placed on the importance of collective security, including the UN Security Council's role in securing world peace, which launched a series of operations led by the United Nations and represented a shift in thinking around state sovereignty and non-intervention. For instance, important linkages were made between human rights and sovereignty in the development of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which outlined the international community's responsibility to assist States in protecting their populations and permitted the bypassing of the UN Charter principle of non-intervention, if necessary, in cases where States were unable or unwilling to protect their populations from harm (Welsh, 2018). These changes brought attention to the importance of individuals in peace and security discussions, Tryggestad (2009) and Susan Willet (2010) agree, and made possible the eventual development of the WPS Agenda.

However, in the context of these international efforts towards collective security, such as the WPS Agenda, post-colonial feminists such as Swati Parashar (2018) critique their Western-centric nature and imperial and colonial underpinnings, and are unconvinced that the WPS Agenda is applicable universally. The WPS Agenda, Parashar (2018) notes, was achieved mainly due to the efforts of governments, non-governmental organizations and international organizations from the Global North, which has important implications for how the Global South is perceived, presented and interacted with, usually as “conflict affected” areas (p. 831). In relation to this, Berit von der Lippe argues (2012) that liberal “feminist” rhetoric on gender equality, democracy, security and human rights is commonly used to mobilize support for war while depicting the (on many occasions, Muslim) “other” as illiberal and gender-oppressive, as was the case with the war in Afghanistan. Feminism is co-opted (by Western women) to “save” women in the developing world (Parashar, 2018; von der Lippe, 2012). The WPS discourse, to post-colonial feminists, is not inclusive of all interests and experiences, as it excludes those that do not fit into secular-liberal frameworks that value community over individual emancipation and empowerment, or gender complementarity over gender equality, for example, even if these alternatives may better align with what some women may want (Parashar, 2018). This challenges the dominant belief that liberalism is universal, and calls for sensitivity to different cultures and perspectives.

Furthermore, post-colonial feminists critique the idea of “global sisterhood,” which has been demonstrated in the historic use of feminism as a tool for imperialism that marginalized and othered the “third world woman” as a result (Parashar, 2018, p. 830). Importantly, Parashar argues, this “dual colonization of women” causes them to be “oppressed by both native and foreign patriarchies,” while Western feminists are perceived to be complicit in this (Parashar, 2018, pp. 830-831). Therefore, large scale military interventions ordered by the UN Security Council can be

construed as “reviving colonial ‘rescue narratives’” (Parashar, 2018, p. 831) or “*mission civilisatrice*,” (Wibben, 2016, p. 106), which equate underdevelopment with insecurity, framing certain issues as distant and creating a pressure to improve the well-being of women elsewhere, in addition to addressing potential threats to national security (Wibben, 2016; Parashar, 2018).

Of relevance to this claim, in her article, Laura J. Shepherd (2016) examines National Action Plans adopted by a number of countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. In her analysis, Shepherd finds that National Action Plans of Western liberal states such as these tend to be “outward-facing,” meaning that they focus on issues taking place internationally, rather than on national issues, despite the high levels of violence and insecurity that could be taking place domestically (p. 324). In Canada’s context, these issues could include challenges in reaching reconciliation with Indigenous communities or sexual misconduct within the armed forces. By doing so, Shepherd argues, these countries paint themselves as “experts” in Women, Peace and Security, which can be linked to engagement in neo-colonial practices of “knowledge transferring” from the Global North to the Global South in their international interventions and the reinforcement of dualities, such as backwards/civilized and inferior/superior (p. 332). Considering this, it should be no surprise that many feminist scholars have expressed concern that peace processes replicate colonial or imperialist practices (Amin & Alizada, 2020; Chandler, 2010; Goodhand & Sedra, 2013; Pugh, 2013; von der Lippe, 2012).

At the local level, it is clear to many scholars that peace processes cannot perform effectively if women from host societies are not actively involved at each stage of projects (Binder et al, 2008). United Nations Resolution 1325 calls for “measures that support local women’s peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and that involve women in all of the implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements” (UN SC, 2000, para. 8) and “consultations

with local and international women's groups" (UN SC, 2000, para. 15). However, as Duncanson and Farr (2019) argue, the WPS Agenda is mostly focused on liberal or Western priorities, such as civil and political rights, rather than economic and social rights, that may be better aligned with the needs and realities of local communities which, as previously established, promotes a false universality of liberal ideals. Similarly, the prominence of military-based approaches in dominant international peace and security efforts emphasizes peace as "ending the war," without sufficient consideration for the multitude of issues local communities may identify as necessary for peace, which also discourages women's engagement in peace processes beyond the community level (Justino et al, 2018, p. 922). However, this engagement has proven to be important. In Afghanistan, women's groups set up schools, health clinics, and other social services; in Nepal, they acted as peace intermediaries between the Maoists and the government and organized peace rallies; in Sierra Leone, women played an important role in challenging the military junta during the civil war through public demonstrations and rallies; and in Liberia, women played an important role in peace negotiations at the international, national and local levels (Justino et al, 2018). However, their full and equal participation at all levels is essential to women's security.

Accountability and Implementation of Resolution 1325

Due to the nature of Resolution 1325, its implementation and accountability measures are an important topic of debate in the literature. Resolution 1325 can – and some argue should – be understood as being an "interlocking piece" for international commitments to women's human rights – as outlined under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women – as well as gender equality (Basu, 2018, p. 194). However, feminist scholars such as Susan Willet (2010) and Nicole George and Laura J. Shepherd (2016) share a similar concern with regards to its lack of mechanisms for ratification, compliance or verification, as a treaty would

have, and the varying levels of implementation within the UN – the Security Council in particular – as well as at the national level. Dharmapuri (2011), Tryggestad (2009), and Binder et al (2008) alike have noted the problem with expecting political commitment to Resolution 1325 without it being legally binding for Member States, since the Resolution was passed under Chapter VI of the Charter of the United Nations, meaning it is without coercive measures, rather than Chapter VII, which invokes coercive enforcement and penalties for noncompliance. Therefore, the implementation of the Resolution relies mostly on the willingness of States to prioritize the WPS Agenda. The Resolution does include some, albeit relatively weak, provisions related to reporting on progress made:

“*[Inviting]* the Secretary-General to carry out a study on the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, the role of women in peace-building and the gender dimensions of peace processes and conflict resolution, and further invites him to submit a report to the Security Council on the results of this study and to make this available to all Member States of the United Nations; [and]

[Requesting] the Secretary-General, where appropriate, to include in his reporting to the Security Council progress on gender mainstreaming throughout peacekeeping missions and all other aspects relating to women and girls” (UN SC, 2000, para. 17-18).

Binder et al (2008) argue that although the Security Council invites the Secretary-General to assess the situation and present it with reports on progress made, this does not ensure the resolution’s implementation, and is not likely to generate substantial impacts, as the Security Council has a tendency to be selective rather than systematic in their approach to the WPS Agenda.

Additionally, although optimistic scholars such as Torunn L. Tryggestad (2009) argue that Resolution 1325 has been successful in creating a new international norm and in placing women, peace and security on the agenda, even Tryggestad agrees that its language is not robust enough; the Security Council “urges,” “encourages,” and “invites,” Member States and the Secretary-General to act, and ends by deciding it will “remain seized on the matter,” without any further direction (p. 544). However, efforts have been made to incorporate provisions in the Resolution into national strategies and approaches, particularly through National Action Plans on WPS.

As previously mentioned, 107 countries have adopted National Action Plans to translate these resolutions into action (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, n.d.). However, implementation remains uneven across the globe. George and Shepherd (2016) argue that potential for change and progress is lost when governments articulate and translate the calls to action listed in the resolution into superficial objectives, including increased representation of women in militaries, in isolation from the ambitious goal of gender mainstreaming.

As noted earlier, gender balancing and gender mainstreaming are two of the United Nations strategies that have been popularized with the adoption of Resolution 1325 to improve women’s participation and representation in peace processes, as well as to ensure gender is considered at every stage of a given project or operation. Sahana Dharmapuri (2011) argues that when peace and security operations include women, they (1) improve information-gathering, as female personnel have proven to be successful in reaching a large portion of the local population, (2) enhance credibility of the mission, notably due to the lower likelihood of misconduct, and (3) better protect personnel, including peacekeepers, from threats on the grounds. Similarly, Sabrina M. Karim (2019) raises the example of how the presence of female peacekeepers in the United Nations mission in Liberia improved responsiveness to rape in Monrovia. However, due to rigid gender

norms, they did not engage frequently or meaningfully with local women – but mostly with local men (Karim, 2019). In addition, unfortunately, the presence of these female peacekeepers had no positive effect on the perceptions of local men on rape, nor did it inspire local women to join the security forces (Karim, 2019), which again indicates that deeper issues remain unaddressed when women are simply added to peace and security processes, and highlights the importance of context.

It would be difficult to foresee any feminist scholars, activists, or advocates disagree with the statement that gender balance is positive, particularly if men and women were properly and equally represented in peace processes, in more ways than numbers. However, certain feminist scholars' express skepticism towards the mere inclusion of women. For instance, Oliviera Simic (2010) suggests that the United Nations' intentions in their encouragement of Member States to deploy more women in peacekeeping operations is not necessarily done to meet gender balance and gender mainstreaming goals, but rather for women to serve as “sexual violence problem-solving forces” and “protectors” of local women from local men and peacekeepers (p. 188). Simic (2010) argues that although their presence can have positive impacts, this is not a substitute for solving the important issue of sexual violence in these operations, and the international community should not lose focus on the more important objectives of the WPS Agenda, as previously noted.

Conversely, Karim and Beardsley (2013) argue that although there was a noticeable increase in the number of peacekeepers between 2000-2010, in a study of distribution patterns in female military personnel, they found that deployments of women correlated more strongly with safer areas, rather than with areas with more serious issues, such as gender-based violence, where their presence and perspective would be most needed. This can be interpreted as a lack of confidence in women's capabilities in dealing with serious issues, as it leaves the tougher issues for men to address. In addition, the act of “shielding” women from danger and prioritizing safer

areas exemplifies and reinforces the tendency to view women as vulnerable and in need of being protected from harm.

Therefore, simply integrating women and/or a gender perspective does not necessarily guarantee the influence of this perspective nor that women will play an important role in decision-making processes that will determine their (in)security. If not done with caution, it can actually contribute to the (re)production of inequalities. As Karim & Beardsley (2013) highlight, women can be the perpetrators of violence, while gender-based violence, such as rape, persists within security institutions themselves, including the military, and can occur even with the integration of women. This has been demonstrated by the widespread misconduct in the Canadian military, for example. The lack of gender mainstreaming and gender balance in these missions are hard to address, due to the lack of accountability within the WPS Agenda and its dependence on voluntary contributions of peacekeeping personnel. Decision-making therefore rests with countries who provide personnel for peace processes, and there is no guarantee that they have internalized the provisions of the WPS Agenda nor that they allow for the recruitment of women in combat roles (Karim & Beardsley, 2013).

Case Study: Afghan Women and the Western Intervention of 2001-2021

The US-led intervention in Afghanistan (2001-2021) was launched only months after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. It initially started as a response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centres on 9/11, resulting in the US' longest war, and has raised some important questions regarding long-term stabilization, state-building and peace-building efforts, notably as they relate to the WPS Agenda (Duncanson & Farr, 2019). Two decades after the West's overthrow of the Taliban regime, the latter have returned to power, reversing much of the progress gained through the WPS Agenda (Akbari & True, 2022). It is important to note that at the time, Resolution 1325 "merely existed," without mechanisms in place for its implementation (Duncanson & Farr, 2019, p. 554). Although the recent turn of events is disappointing, however unsurprising, the advancement of Afghan women's rights has been identified as one of the crowning achievements of this long and devastating war.

Due primarily to the work of Afghan women and the support of the international community through funding and diplomacy, the lives of women and girls improved in a variety of ways, even if temporarily, allowing for more widespread access to education, with the opportunity to participate more fully in public life (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014), as well as, concretely, making possible the inclusion – albeit minimal – of women in the intra-Afghan peace process, and the increase of women's representation in government and the security sector (UN Women, 2022). Today, this situation has regressed, as women are virtually absent from public and political life due to the Taliban's strict restrictions, which has placed the lives and livelihoods of women in even graver danger (UN Women, 2022).

President Biden defended the decision to put an end to the "era of major military operations to remake other countries," despite warnings from the international community of the risk

associated with the timing of the US' plan and the instability that followed the West's swift withdrawal of its military presence, stating the US should learn from its mistakes (Council of Foreign Affairs, n.d., para. 54). The end of this era also presents an important opportunity to evaluate what progress was made following the adoption of the WPS Agenda and how meaningful it really was, considering the current state of affairs.

The following sections will explore the experiences of Afghan women, during this twenty-year war, covering their "liberation" as a rationale for war, realities on the ground, as well as the participation of women in peace negotiations, the lack of results of which greatly impacted the situation the country is in today. Afghanistan being considered the "first testing ground" for the WPS Agenda (Duncanson & Farr, 2019, p. 554), this case study will seek to understand, referring to the research question of the paper, the impact of Resolution 1325 and related efforts on women's agency and, in a broader sense, on the achievement of sustainable (human) security and peace for Afghan women.

The "Liberation" of Women as a Rationale for War

Women's rights and Afghan women's "liberation" was one of the principal moral justifications used by President George W. Bush for the US invasion of Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Gallagher, 2004; Wylie, 2003). This decision was made regardless of the potentially damaging impacts of the war on Afghan women, whom the US was claiming to be saving, even though, as the literature review above demonstrates, military-based solutions are incompatible with women's peace and (human) security. As Berit von der Lippe (2012) argues, the adoption of this narrative is an excellent example of how liberal feminist hegemonic discourse is "co-opted" to defend interventions and uses of force as legitimate, "feminizing" state/security rhetoric (von der Lippe, 2012, pp. 20-21). This simultaneously reinforces the imperial and colonial dichotomy of

the “civilized” versus “uncivilized” (Shepherd, 2016), creating a perceived need, on the part of the “civilized,” to engage in a “*mission civilisatrice*,” (Wibben, 2016, p. 106), which manifests as “aggressive cosmopolitanism” (von der Lippe, 2012, p. 19).

In a speech attempting to justify bombings as part of the “War on Terrorism,” US First Lady Laura Bush appealed to the situation of Afghan women, and said:

“Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784).

The First Lady’s painting of a beautiful picture of the triumph of women’s rights, that seems to good to be true – with women listening to music and teaching their daughters “without fear” – particularly as a privileged white woman from the West, perfectly encapsulates von der Lippe’s (2012) idea of the “white woman’s burden”: the responsibility women in or from the “civilized” world take upon themselves to speak out or act to save the “Third World woman” from injustices caused by her own traditional local culture (pp. 30-33). This narrative destroys the potential for building a “global sisterhood,” and promotes the “othering” (Parashar 2018; von der Lippe 2012) of Afghan women, in addition to promoting the idea that they are victims in need of saving, removing their agency. This subordination of Afghan women is not conducive to their emancipation, from a critical feminist, human security perspective. Although this was done under the guise of women’s rights and freedom, the intervention served state interests, responding to a terrorist attack, and can therefore not be veritably people-centered.

Furthermore, the West’s use of the veil and/or the burqa as a manifestation of victimhood (Gallagher, 2004), aligns with the previously mentioned notion of saving women from their own

traditional cultures. It was widely known that an important tool used by the Taliban to oppress Afghan women was to force them to wear the burqa (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Media outlets throughout the war in Afghanistan circulated images of women lifting their veils, which was viewed as sign of freedom, modernity and victory for the West (Gallagher, 2004). To the US, these images and narratives confirmed that the use of force was in fact necessary, and that it was able to yield positive results. Contrary to the conditions of women's (human) security outlined in this paper, these actions worked against their dignity and agency, as the West was implying here that it knew that the "right" thing was for these women to remove their veils and burqas, and in that way, better align with secular and liberal values perceived to be universal.

Although, in a call for sensitivity to cultural difference, Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) provides an interesting and more accurate illustration of what veiling means to Afghan women:

"I have thought of these enveloping robes as 'mobile homes.' Everywhere, such veiling signifies belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life in which families are paramount in the organization of communities and the home is associated with the sanctity of women" (p. 785).

Unless forced to wear it, it is not an infringement on the rights of Afghan women, however, the West, in this case, seemed to only understand it as a forced custom. Although potentially undesirable or perceived as oppressive to the West, as Gillian Wyllie (2003) argues, local communities must be allowed the space to decide what is in their best interest rather than having it be imposed onto them.

The West's "obsession" with the veil, as Abu-Lughod (2002) puts it, was an important example of the ways in which religious and cultural factors were used to explain women's status and maltreatment, as opposed to historical and political ones, in order to deflect blame for any

hardships they, themselves, may have caused. Framed this way, Western interveners are the heroes, able to avoid responsibility for any roles they played in previous wars, such as their failed efforts for reconstruction following the fall of the Soviet-backed government in 1992 (Gallagher, 2004). However, in reality, the US acted as a “white man” – or, alternatively, a “white woman” – who considers themselves to be “civilized,” and in a position to “[save] brown women from brown men” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784). By doing so, the West positioned itself as the experts in women, peace and security, qualified to transfer knowledge to a country of the Global South, as von der Lippe (2012) suggests, when in reality it caused a significant amount of harm.

Rather than emancipating women, these efforts for so-called “liberation” oppressed Afghan women in a new way, and it is not the first time that the West has used this “feminism” as a colonial tool to rescue whom President Bush called “women in cover” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 783) to serve state interests. During Algeria’s war of independence (1954-62), French authorities insisted that women present themselves unveiled for emergency relief, and as long ago as the late 1800s, English envoy Evelyn Baring (later Lord Cromer), “urged his superiors to colonize Egypt on behalf of the country’s downtrodden women” while also being the founding member of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage in England (Gallagher, 2004; Abu-Lughod, 2002). Similarly, the Bush administration did little to advance women’s rights domestically, and if anything, potentially caused additional hardship for American women, including through cuts in unemployment compensation, disability insurance, health benefits and access to reproductive choices (Gallagher, 2004). This lack of consistency across domestic and international issues reveals the weakness of claims by the US to prioritize women’s rights, and that this was evidently used as a strategy to further state-centric security interests in response to 9/11.

This self-interested act, Duncanson and Farr (2019) argue, is one of the important factors that impeded the success of the WPS Agenda in Afghanistan. According to the critical feminist perspective on human security, the use of state-centric interests, combined with military-solutions, and liberal rhetoric with no consideration for the circumstance on the ground could not guarantee the human security of Afghan women. The United States and its allies' concerns regarding their own national security and wealth were prioritized over all, using language from the WPS Agenda, without being truly committed to women's security (Duncanson & Farr, 2019).

Realities on the Ground: Challenges and Opportunities

The continuous war in Afghanistan has proven to be very damaging to the human security of women, as in addition to not being physically safe, it “[challenged] women’s access to the economic, health, education, and legal services necessary to survive and recover from war’s gendered harms, including sexualized violence, rape, domestic violence, trafficking, abduction, and forced marriage” (Duncanson & Farr, 2019, p. 554). Although Afghanistan had the potential to be the WPS Agenda’s first trial of the UN and Members States’ abilities to integrate women and their perspectives into peacebuilding efforts, there was no mention of Resolution 1325 in any of the resolutions passed by the UN SC in Afghanistan in 2001 (Duncanson & Farr, 2019).

Several important – albeit fragile – developments took place over the last two decades to improve the status and respect for the human rights of Afghan women (Akbari & True, 2022; Duncanson & Farr, 2019), and a few of the central ones will be discussed here. In terms of violence against women, UN Women reported in 2017 that “87 percent of women in Afghanistan experience physical, sexual, or psychological violence during their lifetime, with 62 percent experiencing multiple forms” (Duncanson & Farr, 2019, 554). Measures to address this issue were developed thanks to women’s advocacy on the ground, as well as support from the international

community, notably the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, some of which include: Afghanistan's accession to the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2003; the inclusion of a provision for women and men to be treated equally under the law, in article 22 of the 2004 Afghan constitution; and the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) law passed in 2009 (Duncanson & Farr, 2019). However, these were met with resistance and risk of "roll back" (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014, p. 7). The EVAW law, for instance, was subject to important criticism within the Afghan Parliament, including disagreements with early and forced marriage being considered as a crime, the existence of women's shelters, and conditions on multiple marriages (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014).

In an effort to include women in formal decision-making positions, as requested by Resolution 1325, the Government of Afghanistan established a parliamentary quota; however, women faced serious backlash from men who disapproved of the expansion of women's freedoms and voices (Justino et al, 2018), indicating an incompatibility of these measures with local perspectives. Unsurprisingly, harmful cultural and social norms, including patriarchal values, represented one of the main barriers to gender equality, the advancement of women's rights, as well as women's involvement in formal peace processes and decision-making (Justino et al, 2018). The conservative understandings of tradition and religion, directly linked to gender hierarchies (Wylie, 2003) are deeply entrenched in local ways of thinking and lifestyles. For instance, decision-making often occurred in spaces such as *jirgas* – a traditional assembly of male leaders – that were closed to women (Wylie, 2003). When women were finally invited to join, they were not given the opportunity to speak; and when they did speak, men accused them of blasphemy (Wylie, 2003). Rather than feeling empowered, women who participated in this council felt insecure, as included in these assemblies were also warlords who had a history of being abusive towards

women, including via systemic war rape (Wylie, 2003), which creates inappropriate conditions for women's security. Efforts were also made to increase women's participation in the security sector, to be able to report crimes and access justice; however, local communities opposed their inclusion (Duncanson & Farr, 2019). Nevertheless, Afghan women found ways to participate in peacebuilding processes, by having an influence in the private sphere.

In their study, Justino et al (2018) found that Afghan women described their families and households as being "easy" and "natural" places to have an influence, which according to one of their interviewees, could imply mothers teaching their sons "how to speak and behave" or to "raise their consciousness about peace," in accordance with Islam, a central element to Afghan society (pp. 917-918). These informal and seemingly small acts should not be dismissed as insignificant, as peace and security, according to the critical feminist perspective on human security, is a process rather than a static goal; each contribution counts.

Traditional gender norms not only affected men's perspectives on the role Afghan women could play in peace, but also the lack of awareness of Afghan women themselves of the potential roles they could take on, due to their low levels of education and literacy (Justino et al, 2018). Where non-governmental organizations were present, men paid "lip-service" to gender equality and supported women's engagement in formal peacebuilding initiatives; Justino et al (2018) note that one male leader part of their study had deceptively claimed to support gender equality, as well as understand the importance of women's education and leadership, while his own daughters did not attend school (p. 918).

Importantly, the intervention of Western forces allowed for much greater access to education for women and girls, with some having already been secretly pursuing an education and teaching themselves (Faiz et al, 2021). A report by the Malala Fund found that "3.8 million girls

were enrolled in schools [by 2018], and women's enrolment in tertiary education increased threefold between 2006 and 2020" (Akbari & True, 2022, p. 4). However, in Taliban-controlled areas, the rights of women and girls to education were more severely restricted, with their schooling highly controlled, including in terms of the duration of their studies and the material they are taught, with their social sciences classes being replaced by Islam studies, for instance (Faiz et al, 2021). Education centres were often targets of attacks, with over 1000 schools having closed in the years leading up to the second Taliban rule (Faiz et al, 2021, para. 21). In addition to these restrictions, women and girls were at risk of violence, even murder, for participation in any level of public life (Duncanson & Farr, 2019). Considering the important and dangerous resistance women were faced with, some have considered the WPS to be nearly counterproductive (Duncanson & Farr 2019). This can be linked with clashes between perceived "universal" liberal ideals found in the WPS and local perspectives and lifestyles, which is unsurprising given WPS is a product of primarily Western feminist advocacy.

In close connection to this, the WPS Agenda has been found to emphasize civil and political rights and neglect women's economic and social rights, pressing to local women's needs, which became a source of constraint and insecurity for Afghan women (Duncanson & Farr, 2019). For instance, Afghan women tend to prioritize family relationships over individual rights (Duncanson & Farr, 2019). Although the liberation of women provided the West with moral reasoning for their war, the universalization of women's rights and gender equality – at least as they present it – may have been insensitive to or, to an extent, undesirable in Afghan society (Wylie, 2003). Similarly, perceptions of peace and security, as this paper demonstrates, vary depending on a number of factors, including gender and context. In their interviews with female religious actors, Fabra-Mata and Jalal (2018) found that most described peace as the absence of violence (negative peace);

however, these also coexisted with feelings of positive peace, such as welfare (p. 81). Fabra-Mata and Jalal's (2018) study also revealed the importance of community and inter- and intra-personal relationships to them, as to Islam, which is central to Afghan society, as many of their interviewees linked peace to brotherhood, friendship, compassion and harmony. Each woman interviewed also viewed religious actors' involvement as important to building peace in Afghanistan, as they hold "gravitas, a social stature with legitimacy and trust that emanates from religions [as well as] traditional and cultural norms" (p. 83). This may contradict Western liberal values, based on individuality and secularism, and demonstrates the importance of people-centered approaches, such as the one used in this analysis, in taking into account various factors that make up one's identity, including culture.

The Participation and Human Rights of Women in Peace Talks

This next section will discuss the largely symbolic inclusion and the exclusion of women in peace negotiations and agreements, which stunted their potential for agency, empowerment, peace and security. In a 2014 report for Oxfam, fittingly entitled *Behind Closed Doors: The risk of denying women a voice in determining Afghanistan's future*, Cameron and Kamminga (2014) recount the global trend throughout the war in Afghanistan for peace negotiations and decision-making processes to be held without the knowledge or inclusion of women. Indeed, this report found that out of 23 rounds of peace talks between the Afghan government and insurgency between 2005 and 2014, women were present on only two occasions (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014). These findings demonstrate the particular challenges of negotiating and cooperating with dangerous non-state actors, such as the Taliban.

Although the Bonn Conferences – held between the international community and important Afghan stakeholders other than the Taliban – largely excluded women, they made significant

accomplishments. These include resolutions that reaffirmed “human rights and fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Afghan Constitution, including the rights of women and children, as well as a thriving and free civil society, are key for Afghanistan’s future” and made reference to peace and reconciliation processes, and their outcomes needing to be based on the “respect for the Afghan Constitution, including its human rights provisions, notably the rights of women” (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014, p. 11). Following talks between US President Barack Obama and Afghan President Karzai, the US emphasized the importance of the provisions in the Afghan Constitution that protect the rights of women to peace:

“We will continue to voice very strongly support for the Afghan Constitution, its protection of minorities, its protection of women. And we think that a failure to provide that protection not only will make reconciliation impossible to achieve, but also would make Afghanistan's long-term development impossible to achieve” (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014, p. 12).

On his part, former United Kingdom Foreign Secretary, William Hague, expressed disappointment that:

“Women and women’s groups still have to ask to be included at the negotiating table, as if it were a concession to be granted, or a right to be begrudgingly accorded, when in fact it is the only route to better decisions and stronger and safer societies” (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014, p. 12).

As Cameron and Kamminga (2014) point out, it was clear, at least in their rhetoric, that the objective was for women, as well as their rights, to be central to the peace processes.

Furthermore, US Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Hilary Clinton were especially firm in their statements; Powell claimed “the rights of women in Afghanistan will not be negotiable”

when the war began, while Clinton expressed to female Afghan officials in 2010 that “we will not abandon you, we will stand with you always (...) [it is] essential that women’s rights and women’s opportunities are not sacrificed or trampled in the reconciliation process” (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014, p. 10). At an Afghan Women’s Summit for Democracy in 2001, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan reminded us that “there cannot be true peace and recovery in Afghanistan without a restoration of the rights of women” (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014, p. 10). However, ultimately, as the withdrawal of the West has proven, women and their human rights were not the priority, and were given up in exchange for “peace,” which is the culmination of years of failure to properly implement the WPS Agenda.

What was advocated for and promised in these statements did not reflect the reality. In some cases, there was little to no representation from Afghan women, and when women were present, they did not have the opportunity to speak about peace and security from their perspectives (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014). Although, certain outcomes of these conferences were promising, demonstrating the power of diplomacy. As Cameron and Kamminga (2014) note, due to pressure exerted on the Afghan government by the international community, women accounted for 22% of the delegation during the second Bonn Conference in 2011 (p. 13).

On the other hand, negotiations with the Taliban were very different. Since 2005, the Afghan government and the Taliban had been holding high-level talks, with minimal representation from Afghan women, and other male delegates strongly opposing their presence, one of which told a BBC reporter that “women should not have been present at the talks unless they were accompanied by their husbands or close male family members” (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014, p. 16). However, under the right circumstances, talks with the Taliban had proven to be at least slightly productive. Speaking as one of the two women out of twenty Afghan delegates part of the “Chantilly talks” –

hosted by a French government-funded think tank between 2011 and 2012 – Farkhunda Zahra Naderi, female Afghan parliamentarian said that “women’s participation at the peace table is possible with the Taliban, if those who mediate the discussions prioritize it” (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014, p. 16).

At the German-mediated talks between the US and the Taliban between 2010-2011, the latter made four requests – (1) the release of Taliban prisoners held in Guantanamo Bay, (2) the establishment of an office for the Taliban’s “political affairs,” (3) the removal of Taliban members from the UN’s blacklist, and (4) the complete withdrawal of US forces – and the US agreed to the first three (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014). Their last request, as it is now known, happened regardless of the danger to women, as well as their human rights.

Afghan human rights activists have expressed concern over the lack of conditions, clear direction and transparency in talks with the Taliban, particularly in terms of the protection of women’s rights and civil society, with a US embassy official in Kabul disappointingly confirming that “[the US] can’t impose [women’s rights] as a pre-negotiation redline because that will be counter-productive in getting to talks [...] women’s issues are important, but they are not our top priority” (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014, p. 20). In a *New York Times* piece by Faizi et al (2021) preceding the US’s withdrawal, member of Afghan parliament Raihana Azad summarized well what the future of Afghan women would be: “All the time, women are the victims of men’s wars, but they will be the victims of their peace, too” (para. 6).

After years of negotiation, the US and the Taliban signed the Doha agreement in Qatar in February 2020, which paved the way for the withdrawal of the US’ military, including guarantees from the Taliban that Afghanistan will not be used for terrorist activities, however not calling for

a ceasefire (Council of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). In the days that followed, the Taliban carried out a dozen attacks on Afghan security forces (Council of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

Intra-Afghanistan peace talks began in September 2020, also in Doha, Qatar, between members of the Taliban, the Afghan government and civil society (Council of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Out of the government's 21-member negotiation team were four women: "Fatima Gailani, former constitutional commissioner and president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society; Fawzia Koofi, former member of parliament; Habiba Sarabi, former minister of women's affairs and former governor of Bamyan Province; and Sharifa Zurmati, former member of parliament and former member of the Independent Election Commission" (US Government, 2021, p. 138). Unsurprisingly, there were no women representing the Taliban (US Government, 2021). Although these women were motivated to engage in peace talks, at once concerned and hopeful for the future of Afghanistan, others criticized the continuous lack of transparency around these talks, as well as the preference for "high-ranking governments officials," which excludes more vulnerable groups from participating and prioritized individuals who may not be best placed to represent their perspectives (US Government, 2021, p. 141).

Although women's participation in peace processes is a central element to Resolution 1325, in international summits and conferences that discussed Afghanistan, women were largely excluded to avoid angering the Taliban (Duncanson & Farr, 2019). This is in contrast to the many commitments made by Western States throughout the war that suggested a strong and uncompromising stance was going to be taken in defense for women's human rights.

In 2021, US President Biden released a plan for the withdrawal of remaining troops, which he stated would happen "whether progress is made in intra-Afghan peace talks or the Taliban reduce their attacks on Afghan security forces and citizens" (Council of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). The

Taliban put intra-Afghan peace talks on hold until the international community had fully withdrawn, and on August 15, 2021, the Afghan government collapsed, beginning the second Taliban rule (Council of Foreign Affairs, n.d.), erasing all of the fragile achievements made over twenty years. The next section will cover lessons learned from these experiences, as well as their relevance for women's (human) security going forward.

Discussion

Lessons Learned

A few important lessons can be drawn from Afghan's experiences, post-US intervention and following the adoption of Resolution 1325. First, although the West – the US in particular – had a rough start with regards to Afghan women and their human rights, characterized by what von der Lippe (2012) describes as the “white (wo)man's burden,” involving a “co-optation” of feminist rhetoric to defend the war (p. 19), its presence has proven to be relatively beneficial to women's security, especially prior to the withdrawal of their forces. As displayed in the section covering realities on the ground, with the support of the international community, Afghan women were able to use their agency to advocate for and effect positive change, particularly in terms of measures to counter violence against women, increase political participation, and open access to education for women and girls.

Another lesson is that it is important to demonstrate cultural sensitivity (Abu-Lughod, 2002) in peace and security efforts, and to remember that Western liberal values are not necessarily universal. This was made evident by the different understandings of peace by local communities in Afghanistan, which held a preference for community, relationship-building and religion (Fabra-Mata & Jalal, 2018), as opposed to liberal ideals of individual freedoms and secularism. This also

shed light on how the idea of liberal universality is reflected in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, as there is a prioritization of civil and political rights over social and economic rights in Resolution 1325, itself (Duncanson & Farr, 2019). However, this case study also raises the ways in which harmful cultural and social practices could impede progress in terms of women's security, particularly visible in local resistance and backlash to measures that protected women from violence and sought to increase their participation in decision-making.

Lastly, the experiences of peace talks with the Taliban demonstrated the difficulties in negotiating and reaching agreements with non-state actors. This case study shed light on the necessity of upholding commitments to women's rights at every turn, and the difference that consistent advocacy can make in working towards women's security and ensuring they have a seat at the table (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014). The "Chantilly talks" with the Taliban provided some hope in relation to this, as like one of the two female delegates mentioned, the prioritization of women's inclusion by the mediator makes an important difference in allowing for women's presence to be meaningful, rather than symbolic, and for them to have some level of agency in deciding their futures (Cameron & Kamminga, 2014).

The Future of Afghan Women

The withdrawal of the West from Afghanistan – without firm conditions on the human rights and security of women and girls – has allowed for the Taliban to return to power and reverse the fragile progress gained under the US-led occupation. This has included significant rollbacks and severe restrictions of women and girls' fundamental rights, denying their freedom of expression, movement, work and education (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Women have not been permitted to travel, leave their homes nor go to work without being accompanied by a male family member, and the Taliban has also ordered women's faces to be covered in public and uses

excessive force when dealing with protests against their rules and policies (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In addition, Human Rights Watch (2022) reported that: “In March 2022, the Taliban announced that women and girls would continue to be barred from secondary education, a decision that drew widespread criticism and statements of concern from around the world, including from the entire membership of the United Nations Security Council, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and almost all members of the G7 and G20” (para. 5). This means that many of the achievements made were, unfortunately, only temporary, leaving women in a similar – if not worse – situation than they were in during the first Taliban rule and gender apartheid. This leads to important questions, regarding what can be done to address these injustices and fight to protect what has yet to be lost.

Based on the aforementioned lessons learned, there are a few different actions that can be taken to support Afghan women and girls. First, considering the positive impact of the West on protecting women’s security and the power of diplomacy, the international community should continue to closely monitor the situation of Afghan women under Taliban rule, as well as publicly speak out about violations of the human rights of women and girls, and directly address the Taliban, if possible, demanding an end to the gender apartheid, including the restrictive rules and policies, to allow for the emancipation of Afghan women. As UN Women (2022) suggests, this could also include the use of sanctions.

Second, taking into account the role Afghan women advocates and civil society played in advancing women’s security and human rights, the international community should provide them with technical and financial support, so that they can continue to be active members of their communities and provide essential services, including educational resources. This could take the

form of financial support and building networks (Akbari & True, 2022; UN Women, 2022), and could also include the evacuation of Afghan women whose lives are at risk (Akbari & True, 2022).

As a more long-term goal, using a critical feminist approach to human security, the UN Security Council, along side other UN Member States, should endeavour to review the WPS Agenda, including Resolution 1325, to limit the problematic and prominent use of military-based solutions to address women's (human) security, as well as find ways to better include economic, social and cultural rights to ensure peace and security efforts are sensitive to different cultures and circumstances, in addition to being gender-sensitive. This will reduce the chances of the security community being the source of human insecurities.

Conclusion

This major research paper sought to explore whether the WPS Agenda – Resolution 1325, in particular – provides the necessary conditions for women's agency and, in a broader sense, the achievement of sustainable (human) security and peace, using the twenty-year war in Afghanistan (2001-2021) as a case study. To do so, it applied a critical feminist approach to human security, with particular consideration for the concept of agency, in an analysis of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. This paper argued that women's agency is necessary to achieving women's security in a meaningful and sustainable way, and that to create conditions wherein this is possible, the state-centric, masculinist, militarist, colonial and imperial underpinnings of the security system – whose policies and practices often cause women's insecurity – will need to be dismantled.

From the literature review, it was possible to identify the following discrepancies to the WPS Agenda: (1) the endurance of militarism and masculinity, (2) the protection and victimization

of women, (3) colonial legacies and liberal interventionism, and (4) gaps in accountability and implementation of Resolution 1325. In this paper's analysis of Afghan women's experiences during the war, three main lessons learned were derived: (1) the benefits – although fragile and temporary – of the presence of the international community to local women's security and the ability of advocates and civil society to effect positive change on the ground; (2) the importance of cultural sensitivity and the false universality of Western liberal ideals; and (3) the necessity of upholding commitments to women's security and human rights in negotiations with non-state actors, such as the Taliban.

In a world characterized by many evolving crises, it is important to not lose sight of the “human” aspect of peace and security nor to turn our backs of those who most need support from the international community. Since the Taliban took over in 2021, conflicts such as the War in Ukraine, and most recently, the Israel-Hamas War, have emerged, attracting most of the world's attention. With these conflicts happening in parallel, this paper urges the international community to continue to closely monitor the situation of Afghan women under Taliban rule, publicly speak out about human rights violations, and demand an end to the gender apartheid in an effort to prioritize human security over all else.

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