

White Saviors? The U.S. Military and Muslim Women

By Sayantani DasGupta

[With the U.S. military (supposedly) withdrawing from Afghanistan, Washington and the corporate media are, once again, expressing their concern for “saving” Muslim women from oppression. —Editor's note]

The U.S. military is not a feminist institution.

This shouldn't be news to anyone. Despite the over 200,000 women in the active duty military, including 69 generals and admirals (CNN 2013 figures), women remain a relatively low percentage of the overall U.S. military, comprising approximately 14% of the enlisted force and 16% of officers.



*George and Laura Bush with Afghan President Hamid Karzai at Camp David.
Photo: Department of Defense*

Beyond numbers, the U.S. military has a serious gender-based violence problem. From intimate partner abuse to well-publicized cases of sexual harassment, and the insidious military culture of soldier-to-soldier rape and victim-blaming addressed in the award winning 2012 documentary, *The Invisible War*, it is clear the U.S. military has far to go in adopting any sort of feminist ethos into its institutional culture. (While there are assuredly individual feminists in the U.S. military or at least military people committed to gender justice, what I'm talking about here is the overall culture of the institution.)

Yet, why then, has a sort of “global feminist” stance been used so frequently to justify U.S. military presence abroad? Why, in our public imagination, have the U.S. military been the “liberators” of “oppressed” Muslim women?

A Treacherous Sympathy: Consider a recent LA Times article “A precarious time for Afghan women,” (February 4, 2014) which suggests that “Since the Taliban’s fall, women have seen fitful gains. But those with access to education and work fear the U.S. troop departure will erode their freedoms.”

The article quotes several Afghani women, including 26 year-old Ghazalan Koofi, who “came of age after the U.S.-led military invasion toppled the repressive Taliban government in 2001” and now fears that there will be a rollback of women’s freedoms. In her words, “We are entering a very dangerous period for women...I’m very worried that we will return to those terrible days when the only place for a woman was in the home, doing housework and serving the men.”

For both Koofi and the other women interviewed for this article, what is not at all clear is if they see the solution to their concerns about housework, education, free public movement or employment in the form of continued foreign military presence. Yet, regardless of the intention of the women interviewed, that is indeed how the article itself is framed.

And as U.S. troops prepare to (supposedly) leave Afghanistan entirely, it behooves us to be clear about what type of a story articles like this are telling. Because what sentiments like these do is endorse a foreign savior narrative, what Leila Ahmed called, in the context of turn of the century Egypt, a “colonial feminism”—selective concern by foreign military leaders with symbols of the oppression of Muslim women, including the veil. These were leaders who were at the same time often deeply opposed to women’s suffrage or other freedoms for women in their own countries.



Laura Bush and Hilary Clinton, with current Secretary of State John Kerry, receiving an award in Washington for their work with women in Afghanistan and around the world.

Photo: Carolyn Kaster/AP Photo

This imperialist strategy is not new, but has been used with missionary zeal by British, French and other colonialists for centuries now in their relationships with

Muslims, Hindus and other subjects. Consider the practice of French colonialists staging elaborate ceremonies in which Algerian women subjects were “unveiled” and thereby “liberated.”

Indeed, this savior narrative is a deeply patriarchal perspective that locates power in the hands of foreign men and ultimately renders the foreign women they “save” quite powerless in the saving of themselves. In examining the British Raj’s opposition to child marriage and widow immolation (sati) in colonial India, post-colonialist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak coined the phrase “white men rescuing brown women from brown men,” whereby this trope of “rescuing women” becomes a justification for colonial aggression, but ultimately the voices of the “brown women” are rendered utterly silent. This framing renders invisible any activism by said brown women in securing their own liberation; rather, they are envisioned to be perpetual victims in need of external saving.

Any critiques of colonial aggression, then, become near impossible, as war itself is sugarcoated, understood as a means to “free” foreign women from “oppression.” In a more recent essay called “A Treacherous Sympathy with Muslim Women,” Leila Ahmed has suggested that the burqa has become a sort of “shorthand moral justification” for the war in Afghanistan. As she observes,

“...books by Muslim women recounting their personal oppressions under Islam soared in popularity in the very years that our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were in fact costing many mostly Muslim women their very lives....in the period in which the general public was apparently – judging by these best-selling books – deeply empathizing with Muslim women oppressed by Islam, they were simultaneously apparently not much disturbed, let alone outraged, at the unnumbered lives of Muslim women and children destroyed in these wars.”

White Women Saving Brown Women from Brown Men: Interestingly, Spivak’s trope of “white men saving brown women” can just as easily be writ on Western women who seek to “save” brown women, and are unable to critique the racist and colonialist assumptions inherent in this “saving.” As anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod has suggested in her now classic “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” (see her 2013 book of the same title from Harvard University Press): “I do not think it would be as easy to mobilize so many of these American and European women if it were not a case of Muslim men oppressing Muslim women—women of cover for whom they can feel sorry and in relation to whom they can feel smugly superior.” (Here, Abu-Lughod is using George W. Bush’s famous phrase “women of cover” to refer to Muslim women)

This is also consistent with a trope I call the “your women are oppressed, but our women are awesome” narrative, seen most obviously in the 2012 PBS documentary series based on the 2009 New York Times best selling book, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. This trope appears in many other media storylines as well, and

symbolically pits (awesome, liberated, empowered!) women from the Global North against (downtrodden, voiceless, oppressed) women from the Global South.

Abu-Lughod suggests that this impetus to “save” Afghani or Iraqi women is tied to the post-9/11 U.S. and European obsession with “The Muslim Woman” as a figure representing religious and cultural, as opposed to political or historical, explanations of terrorism. This perspective similarly glosses over the role of globalization or poverty in Muslim women’s lives. As Abu-Lughod argues, “Instead of questions that might lead us to the exploration of global interconnections we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres—recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas.”

Indeed, it was Laura Bush’s now infamous (in global feminist circles at least) November 2001 radio address to the American people where she declared that, “The brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists.” Conflating the Taliban and terrorism, placing them in opposition to “all civilized people,” and linking the two directly to the oppression of Afghani women and children was a central function of this historic address.

Interestingly, the language of feminism and anti-violence was invoked in Laura Bush’s famous address. Specifically, she employed terms from the Power and Control Wheel, which explains how not just physical abuse but verbal abuse, intimidation, isolation and control are used as methods in partner violence. (This frame-work is known widely in anti-gender-violence movements as the Duluth Model.) Laura Bush’s address was yet another example of feminist principles usurped for colonialist ends. In her words, “The plight of women and children in Afghanistan is a matter of deliberate human cruelty, carried out by those who seek to intimidate and control.” (emphasis mine)

Which of course raises the question: why this disproportionate concern over “intimidation and control” by overseas Muslim men over Muslim women where that same concern is not seen regarding gender-based violence among any community in the U.S.? Why indeed if not to vilify an entire religious community and frame gender oppression as something understood in the U.S. to be inherent in “their culture”? (To be clear, what I am arguing isn’t that gender-based violence doesn’t occur in the Global South; rather, that it occurs everywhere, and ‘brown women’ aren’t somehow more “oppressed” than their sisters in the Global North, and therefore in need of “saving.”)



Identity. Painting by Hend Al Mansour. hendalmansour.com also on Facebook

Women and Children in Need of Foreign “Protection”: Simultaneously, this way of looking at Muslim women’s lives has dovetailed with far more traditional patriarchal rhetoric whereby war and military aggression become justified as ways to protect women, children, and the home. Again, in Laura Bush’s words, “We respect our mothers, our sisters and daughters. Fighting brutality against women and children is not the expression of a specific culture; it is the acceptance of our common humanity—a commitment shared by people of good will on every continent.”

Such invocations of military might being necessary to protect both “home and hearth” and “women and children overseas” are what antiracist and antiviolence feminist scholar Zillah Eisenstein has called “the lie of women and children.” (Aljazeera.com, 2 October 2013). Eisenstein recently critiqued how the Obama administration justified its plan to attack Syria due to the danger that chemical weapons pose to “women and children.” She argues, “If the use of chemical warfare is inhumane, it is inhumane for each and every human body, not just for women and children. Age and gender need not be specified.” (Of course, the Obama administration’s assertion that the Syrian government was in fact involved in the use of chemical weapons against the Syrian people, is in and of itself deeply suspect.)

Invoking protection for foreign women and children suggests that somehow they are (to borrow from the rhetoric of the HIV epidemic) “innocent victims” in opposition to their fathers, brothers, husbands, friends, and sons who are made “guilty” by sheer virtue of their gender. Like celebrity exhortations to “adopt an impoverished child” in a far-away land, the rhetoric of “women and children” (or, as feminist political theorist Cynthia Enloe once phrased it “womenandchildren”) creates a category of agency-less beings taken out of context from their communities and countries, obligated to seek protection from the benign white foreign military patriarchy.

Solidarity, Not Saving: Perhaps the best lesson to understand the conflict in Afghanistan, and therefore future conflicts, is for the U.S. public to step back, and examine the implications of our concern for “The Muslim Woman.” A stance of solidarity, not saving, might be to acknowledge, as Cynthia Enloe did in a September 13, 2013 interview in wagingnonviolence.org,

"...any progress that's been achieved for women in Afghanistan has been due to the guts and bravery and intelligence of Afghan women themselves. Afghan women have worked so hard as mothers of daughters, as lawyers, as human rights activists, as people running for the legislature. So many Afghan women have resisted masculinized, violent forces to carve out some space for women's dignity, women's literacy, women's schooling, and women's political and public influence. It's a huge accomplishment that they have carved out as much space as they have."



U.S. soldiers kicking in a door during a raid in Afghanistan. Afghan President Karzai refuses to sign an agreement allowing “residual” U.S. troops to remain in Afghanistan unless they agree to stop the house raids and air strikes that, in addition to crossfire, result in so many civilian casualties.

Photo: Press TV

In addition, maybe we could leave aside our obsession over “veils,” and instead try to stand in solidarity with our Muslim sisters both in the Middle East and in the U.S. Perhaps we could follow the lead of feminist and antiviolence Muslim activists, instead of trying to rush in and “save” them. We might also do some self-examination of how racism and sexism against Muslim women work in our own country, recognizing that hand-in-hand with narratives about Muslim women’s oppression overseas comes an easy Islamophobia whereby Muslim women in the U.S. are racially profiled as terrorists, subjected to violence, or used as symbols to stereotype and dehumanize their families and communities.

The U.S. military has not been engaged in a feminist undertaking in Afghanistan, Iraq, or any other country. It’s time we stopped believing that hackneyed narrative, and started recognizing just how insidious even the rhetorical weapons of violence can be.

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