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Agency Through Ambiguity: Women NGO Workers in Jalalabad, Afghanistan

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Agency Through Ambiguity: Women NGO Workers in Jalalabad, Afghanistan

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Najhma, a Pashtun women involved in various development projects and associations promoting women in Afghanistan, met me at the hotel where I was staying, and brought her small niece. This was our fourth or fifth meeting; Najhma, despite her busy schedule, wanted to tell her story. I asked whether the girl, who was about five or six years old, came along because Najhma was babysitting. Najhma replied that many Pashtuns in Jalalabad consider it improper for a woman to be seen outside of her house alone. The presence of a small child is usually an acceptable remedy for this problem, and so Najhma, who is unmarried, "borrowed" her niece for the afternoon.

I was slightly overwhelmed after hearing about the many development and aid projects Najhma had been involved with, while she at the same time studied evenings in a business program for her Bachelor's degree. She made clear her dedication to helping women in Afghanistan, while also stressing the importance of her own personal goal to become a doctor, as she had also recently been admitted to medical school. During this meeting she explained that, after finishing medical school and business school, she would try to create a hospital for women.

After the meeting, I told Najhma that my fiancé (also an Afghanistan researcher) and I would accompany her out and then visit the bazaar. Najhma and I both fitted the caps of our burqas (the all enveloping covering which only has a small grid through which to look) over our scarves, on top of our heads. While on the hotel grounds we wore them in this fashion, our faces visible, and yet ready to pull down once we reached the street. As we slowly walked up the path of the hotel grounds, we passed two men we did not know. I watched as Najhma pulled her scarf

across her face and averted her eyes downwards. Once we reached the front entrance, we pulled the front of the burqa down so that we were completely covered.

I went to Afghanistan to do research with women non-governmental organization (NGO) and development project workers and ended up focusing much of my energy and attention on the behavioral requirements of "doing *pashto*" —— referred to also as Pashtunwali, or simply pashto. As I made efforts to conform to certain aspects of pashto, such as wearing the burqa, limiting interactions with men, and not going out alone, I began to wonder about the ways that women NGO workers did pashto, and what meaning it held for them personally, even as they seemed to be breaking many of its norms. When women do pashto well, they should be modest in dealing with men and maintain seclusion to the extent possible for their particular situations. Najhma's visit with me exhibits some of the more superficial ways that women do pashto, such as averting her gaze away from men to demonstrate her separation from them or moving about the city in the company of a family member, in this case her niece.

In general, values such as honor, revenge, hospitality, purdah (segregation of the sexes), modesty, and egalitarianism are considered the core of what it means to be Pashtun.[1] Of these values, purdah appears to assert the greatest effect on women. At its most extreme form it largely restricts them to their homes. My initial expectation was that these aspects of pashto would make it nearly impossible for women to work outside the home without renouncing their adherence to pashto. What I found was considerable variation among women in the degree to

[1] Pashtuns are the numerically largest ethnicity in Afghanistan, and the majority in the area of Nangarhar Province and Jalalabad City, specifically, where I did the research. Pashto refers to their language, but Pashtun identity is closely tied with Pashtunwali, or doing pashto. For this reason language and behavior, both considered vital to Pashtun identity, are considered two sides of a coin and have the same name. In this paper I capitalize Pashto only when referring specifically to the language.

which and the ways in which the demands of pashto could be reconciled with the expectations of a Western-derived secular feminism[2] and the emphasis that it places on women's self-actualization and empowerment through gaining personal skills and income, preferably via employment outside the home. More specifically, I found that it was not women in the middle of the social/economic ladder but women at either end — either those from an educated family, or those who are extremely poor and without a male breadwinner —who show the greatest flexibility in interpreting pashto.

Studies of women from patriarchal, and often Muslim, backgrounds taking on a more public role often rely upon a resistance paradigm which emphasizes the ways in which women subvert the norms of their society, whether openly or covertly.[3] Other studies question the resistance paradigm, suggesting that non-Western Muslim women can and do express agency while eschewing resistance.[4] I find both these approaches lacking — the theoretical a priori that women must either be resisting or accommodating to patriarchal control does not do justice to the complex influences on any individual's life, particularly in a globalized world, and much less the diversity of women's perspectives in any one Muslim society. I seek to join ethnographers who have presented a more nuanced view of women's agency, resistance, and acquiescence. I aim to circumvent the resistance/accommodation binary by bringing into debate the idea of "strategic ambiguity" as a way women cope with competing factors in their worlds, some demanding resistance or active participation, and others acquiescence.

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[2] I am aware that referring to Western feminism in this way conflates a wide variety of differences in feminist beliefs and movements and is therefore a somewhat inadequate term. However, Afghans seem to interpret one type of feminism that emerges from the West and that is expressed through various projects and programs directed at women and implemented by different organizations.

[3] Examples include Boesen (1983) and Abu-Lughod's earlier work (1985), among others.

[4] The recent work which most adamantly rejects resistance in favor of acquiescence is surely Mahmood (2005).

In many ways, the behaviors expected of Pashtun women seem to conflict with the requirements of employment with NGOs. The women can feel subject to two sets of value systems which are often at odds with one another. While most NGOs try to bring their projects in line with Pashtun norms, the very core of projects such as women's literacy and income generation are rejected by those Pashtuns who expect extreme enactment of modesty and seclusion. Individuals working for NGOs often feel conflicted. For example, an informant working for an NGO with the goal of creating income-generation opportunities for women told me that he takes his own two wives, who do not work, to the park or the bazaar about once a month, and they are also allowed to visit family members every few weeks. Beyond this, he either does not know of or does not acknowledge trips they might make outside of the house.

The women working for the organizations are pulled by, and attracted to, these different influences. They affirm pashto as an important part of their identity, and their place in the larger community, by expressing their actions in terms of doing pashto. They seem to do this only partly for pragmatic reasons. Maintaining pashto is important for their own self-comfort and that of their families. They mold some of their workplace tasks, behaviors, and relationships to bring them more in line with the tenets of doing pashto, while other aspects of pashto are ignored. At times they subvert or manipulate pashto norms. At times they uphold, subvert, and manipulate the goals and viewpoints of the Western-oriented[5] organizations with which they work or receive funds. They shape their narratives to demonstrate that they are doing pashto, even when what they actually do might be questionable were their actions to be scrutinized by members of their larger community. The NGO workers rarely, if ever, speak negatively about doing pashto. When

[5] My use of Western-oriented in referring to a broad range of organizations involved in development projects is somewhat inadequate because of the problems associated with the label Western, but I have chosen to retain this label to differentiate them from international Islamic organizations, which are also active in Afghanistan but which I did not have the opportunity to research.

they talk about their actions in the workplace, they insist that they maintain pashto, even when what they describe themselves as doing seems vague or even unacceptable according to the generally accepted ideas as to what makes up the main values and behaviors of pashto. For these women, ambiguity provides a comfort zone as they negotiate the space between demands placed on them as Pashtuns, and demands placed on them as NGO workers.

Strategic ambiguity is a concept introduced by Karl Reisman and Marvin Harris. Reisman, in "Cultural and Linguistic Ambiguity in a West Indian Village" (1971), describes a pervasive preference for ambiguity as a way in which status subordinates express forbidden and possibly subversive thoughts while at the same time hiding these thoughts from status superiors or maintaining a screen of plausible deniability of any critical intent from their listeners. Reisman says linguistic ambiguity is a skill, a repertory and a preference that West Indians inherit from their Afro-Caribbean slave and ex-slave forebears. It allowed those in subordinate positions to exert themselves in covert ways, enhancing their own prestige among peers while tacitly disobeying social superiors. Harris (1970) refers to ambiguity as it relates to racial identity and labeling. He found that Brazilians are extremely ambiguous in applying racial labels. The ambiguity, or "noise," created by the number and variations of racial labels, can serve a purpose as class and race had a correspondence in Brazil. For Harris, ambiguity helped to stem the development of conflict between classes. The noise created by racial classifications could blur the lines between these distinctions of race and, by extension, class. More recently, Isar Godreau (2008) has also discussed ambiguity in racial labeling and interpretation in Puerto Rico. She emphasizes intracultural and context-dependent variation in labeling: how one labels another or

himself can change from one situation to another. Depending upon the context, individuals might decide to use different labels either to show solidarity or create distance with others.[6]

My argument is in essence that women working in Afghan NGOs, like people in the starkly unequal slavery and post-slavery societies of Brazil, Puerto Rico and the West Indies, find it necessary to navigate the spaces between the norms of globalizing Western-derived institutions and their ancestral groups' allegiances and values. In the case of Pashtun women development workers in Afghanistan, a patriarchal/Islamic culture and the requirements of a Western office, organized at least partially around secular/feminist values, enter into daily conflict. A type of strategic ambiguity allows them to open a space of non-negation vis-à-vis both sets of norms, values and expectations. Similar to Godreau's explanation of the importance placed on context in choosing racial labels, Pashtun NGO workers engage with pashto differently depending on the context in which they find themselves. NGO workers in Jalalabad obfuscate what it means to be Pashtun and practice pashto by referring to their behaviors vaguely, or by describing actions in the workplace as permissible, while these same behaviors are described as not permissible for women in other contexts, such as a small village. I believe that it is important to honor the women's insistence that they do not wish to circumvent pashto (and hence are not "resisting"). Instead, they have created a new understanding of what it is to practice pashto as a result of the intersection between their career lives and their identity as Pashtun women. They resist certain aspects of pashto but choose not to discard the system, instead molding it into something that is useable for their needs.

My research took place over the summer months of 2010 in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, a city that with a population of just over 200,000 is the capital of Nangarhar province and the

[6] I would like to thank my advisor, Samuel Martínez, for pointing out that strategic ambiguity is a possible explanation for the actions of Pashtun women NGO workers.

largest city of the Eastern regions of Afghanistan. Located close to the border with Pakistan, it has a thriving market (when compared to most other areas of Afghanistan) and is actually slightly better off economically than Kabul. However, it is still home to a significant impoverished population. An insurgent presence in the surrounding rural regions causes ongoing internal displacement, and large numbers of refugees have been returning from Pakistan since 2001. Numerous makeshift camps cluster around the outskirts of town to accommodate these returnees.

As the largest city of the Eastern regions, Jalalabad is home to many international and internationally funded NGO and development organizations. The NGOs I spent time with vary in structure. Some have foreign managers in site, others have local managers on site with foreign managers located in Kabul (usually the case for organizations that operated in several cities), and some are local and purely Afghan in leadership. Some are local branches of international organizations operating in many locations throughout the world, others are founded by internationals but operated only in Afghanistan, and a few are locally started. None of the organizations is completely self-sustaining, so they rely to a great extent on foreign donors to continue operations, a situation that influences the types of projects they are able to administer. All of the organizations are concerned, at least in part, with women's income generation, usually by means of sewing or weaving projects. Jalalabad is also home to a military base that supports an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT), a joint civilian/ military structure that engages in reconstruction, development, and military activities, and which also provides some support for development and NGO type organizations. Given that the "liberation of women" was proclaimed by the US government as one of the driving reasons for continuing military operations in the country after the Taliban fell, it is no

surprise that many of these organizations implement projects on women and gender related activities, such as sewing for income generation, literacy classes, and health care. It is essential that the organizations have female staff, because purdah requirements make it difficult, if not impossible, for men alone to administer these projects.

My being an American woman facilitated my entry into the field, while it hindered understanding of my aims and methods. Because Afghanistan is host to numerous aid and development organizations that focus on women, NGO workers are used to the presence of foreigners who design assessments, conduct interviews, and write reports, which are completed relatively quickly. The intention is often to implement a new project based on their findings, or monitor and evaluate an ongoing project. My entry into the community was facilitated by my being initially seen to be yet one more foreigner carrying out an assessment. Disconcerting to some of my hosts, however, was my interest in staying a long time, hanging around in offices and homes (participant-observation), and the in-depth, rather than survey-like, nature of my interviews. Some NGO workers quickly understood the nature of my work, and were extremely helpful in allowing me to visit them regularly and accompany them to events such as handicraft fairs or trips to the field. Others continued to expect me to provide a development project, or expected me to be a source of links to donors. My identity was, for these reasons, both a benefit and a hindrance, depending on the circumstance.

I interviewed approximately thirty women during my study, and there were about ten with whom I worked extremely closely. I also interviewed approximately ten male staffers at the organizations, and approximately ten recipients of the projects funded by the organizations, generally highly secluded women in nearby villages. Because this paper concerns a specific group of Pashtun women, NGO workers, and because it has a fairly small sample, it is meant to

raise questions rather than make generalizations, based on my ethnography of the circumstances that surround this particular group of women at this particular time in Afghanistan.

A Brief Overview of the Social and Historical Landscapes of Afghanistan and Jalalabad

In most of the rural areas around Nangarhar Province that I visited, it is virtually unthinkable for families to allow their daughters to work in offices and travel unaccompanied to other villages or the city. Young girls may be allowed to go to school in these areas, although this is curtailed once a girl reaches the age of eleven or twelve, if not sooner. A lack of schools dedicated to girls, combined with the possibility of violence against schoolgirls, means that attendance even at young ages is difficult. After adolescence and later, after marriage, women are usually very self-aware when they do go out, and try to avoid non-*mahram* men.[7] Trips further afield than the immediate area surrounding their cluster of *qalas* (walled compounds in which most Pashtuns live) are somewhat rare, although of course women travel to bazaars, to visit family members or for events like weddings. From what my informants told me, it is important that there be a reason women are traveling. They must not be seen to be outside without purpose, and they are usually accompanied by a male relative, and if this not possible, another woman, or as a last resort, a child. Having a purpose, in this case employment, for what they are doing is one way NGO workers justify being outside of their homes when working in offices.

Jalalabad itself, as an urban center, allows many girls the opportunity attend elementary school, and for some high school and university. Other women might benefit from attending

[7] A *mahram* man is someone considered ineligible for marriage, usually due to incest, and so not a sexual threat. These are men with whom women are able to more freely interact.

sewing and literacy centers, usually run by a development organization, or a local NGO.[8] Jalalabad is home to many families from socio-economic, educational, or political backgrounds that are more likely to allow daughters and wives to work, although they cannot be considered a majority. NGO workers themselves emphasize that working outside the home is not ideal. In addition to residents who have lived in the city for many years, Jalalabad has had a huge influx of rural migrants, as well as returned refugees and internally displaced people, who often have a more restrictive attitude towards women's movement, in some cases because of a rural background and in others because of dangers they faced during displacement. This influx of people with more conservative viewpoints puts pressure on urban inhabitants who otherwise favor less restrictions to use caution in deciding whether women should attend school, university, work, or even make short trips outside of the home.

More than one NGO leader in Afghanistan confided to me that carrying out gender-related projects are not their highest priority but that, because donors place an emphasis on this type of work, they plan such projects in order to ensure funds. Some change the core goals of their organization to concentrate on women, while others see carrying out women-related projects as a temporary way to receive funds and keep their organization afloat until funds become available for projects that lie closer to their hearts. The end result has been that there is a large job market for women to work for these NGOs, as projects dedicated to women in such an extremely sex-segregated society must have women staffers. Many of the leaders at the NGOs and organizations, both male and female, told me that, relative to demand, few women are able or willing to take the social risk required.

[8] It is not unheard of for a woman from a village, usually who has relatives in the city, to study or work in the city. However, depending upon the security situation in the village this often makes impossible her return, as many consider her "ruined". The same is often true for men who leave a village to work or study in the city, as they are considered to have left behind the "traditional" life of the village.

The overarching Afghan social landscape, particularly in large cities, has undergone major changes over the past forty years, with varying impact on women's lives. Afghanistan since the turn of the 21st century has witnessed various reforms intended to give women more rights, including communist campaigns supported by the Soviet Union. *Mujahedin* groups that fought the Soviet Union were often extremely conservative and restricted women's access to schools and movement in the public sphere in the areas they controlled (although women also assisted the *mujahedin* behind the scenes). The civil war period, when various *mujahedin* groups fought for control after the Soviet withdrawal, was a time of severe insecurity. Although concentrated in Kabul, the fighting affected the entire population. The Taliban took control at the end of the civil war period, and provided security through very harsh measures, alongside the creation of laws ensuring perhaps the severest restrictions on women yet to be seen. Today the situation has become extremely muddled with regard to women's involvement in public spaces. International influences, in the form of development and aid programs, encourage women to work, go to school, and take an active role in their communities. Programs sponsored by the Afghan government can also reflect these types of movements, which is not surprising if one considers the heavy Western involvement in Afghan state building. At the same time, there now exists a population of young men who came of age during *mujahedin* and Taliban periods. Such elements, often Taliban supporters, can threaten women who choose to take on a more public role. Starting from a period when women were given rights on paper, women then lived a period when they had almost no rights under the law, and now see women's rights being fiercely debated. Competing discourses may give some room for women to negotiate the traditional structure, while women who do take on a more active role in the public sphere can be putting themselves at considerable risk.

Pashtunwali, or "Doing pashto"

So-called traditional systems of behavior such as Pashtunwali or doing pashto are often described in a way that presents them as static and unchanging. In reality, such systems are always adapting to new circumstances, and in the case of Afghanistan the pace of change has likely accelerated over the past forty years. It is outside of the scope of this paper to address these many changes, and much of what my interviewees told me about the basics of doing pashto conforms to earlier scholarly descriptions.

Doing pashto refers to certain expectations for comportment[9] for men and women that give structure to Pashtun society. It is most often described as a system that conceptualizes the maintenance of Pashtun identity through behaviors that display revenge, modesty, and offering hospitality (among others). Doing pashto varies from region to region, changes over time, and allows Pashtuns a certain degree of flexibility in deciding how to practice pashto.

According to Charles Lindholm (1982), Pashtuns define themselves by practicing pashto, and doing pashto provides "a charter for public action which both ratifies the necessities of the social structure and conceals its contradictions" (210).[10] The differing interpretations of pashto creates a situation whereby, some behaviors that seem contradictory are allowed as they are subsumed under the broad mantle of this code. This variability opens cracks for strategic ambiguity to grow; even as individuals display different and perhaps contradictory actions, they

[9] Often doing pashto or Pashtunwali is referred to as a code of comportment, and when discussing other scholars' interpretations I may fall back on this term. However, I prefer the looser "expectations for comportment" because it reflects the flexibility, and the variations, one can find among different groups of Pashtuns. A code implies something set in stone, and I do not believe, after interviewing Pashtun men and women, that pashto is without a range of flexibility.

[10] Another example is Islam's relationship to pashto. Many pashto practices, such as denying inheritance to women and levirate, are at odds with Islam. However, since pashto is considered to be inherently Islamic, these contradictions are often overlooked.

can, despite variations, maintain the belief that they are practicing pashto well. Most Pashtuns profess to do pashto (all of the NGO workers did), and yet this takes on various forms depending on the actor. Purdah may be a necessity, but for one it means restriction to one's courtyard and village, while to another it means speaking with non-*mahram* men only when necessary, such as in an office setting.

Lindholm writes that there are three pillars, or core values, at the heart of doing pashto — *badal* (revenge or exchange), *melmastia* (hospitality — Pashto *melma*, guest), and *nanawatai* (giving refuge to anyone, including one's enemies — Pashto *nanawatal*, to enter). In addition, he cites other aspects often mentioned in reference to Pashtunwali, including equality, respect, loyalty, pride, bravery, purdah, the pursuit of romantic relationships,[11] the worship of Allah, and the unselfish love for one's friend (211). Honor, interpreted as both the inner feeling of self-righteousness and the importance of one's image in the eyes of the community members, is the overarching value that subsumes the ethical behaviors mentioned above.[12] *Badal* meaning revenge is something that must be undertaken to uphold one's honor when it is violated. *Melmastia* is an indicator of one's honor, as not showing the proper hospitality hurts one's honorable reputation within the community. *Nanawatai* also displays ones honor (and has the potential — although not necessarily — to decrease the status of the person seeking refuge).

Badal (revenge) might take the form of violent retaliation against a third party who hurt the honor and respectability of a family member (male or female). Sometimes such acts of retaliation result in the loss of lives. For mothers, sisters or wives, this (in addition to emotional suffering) may often mean the loss of a male relative on whose economic support they depended.

[11] In reality, romantic relationships between men and women are not condoned, and should someone become involved in such a relationship they would be censured, punished and at worst killed. Thus, romantic relationships remain an unobtainable ideal. Additionally, Lindholm describes relationships between extremely close male friends as romantic, and I think, based on my experiences, that this is the case for women as well.

[12] Honor has been the subject of many, varying anthropological studies. See

In the case of the settling of the feud through customary law (usually involving the intervention of a council of elders — Pashto *jirga*), the solution reached may include blood money, or the concession in marriage (free of brideprice) of girls and women to male members of the wronged party (Pashto *bad*).[13]

Melmastia and *nanawatai* can impact women in ways that are often overlooked. *Melmastia* is usually described as the hospitality a host shows guests, and the public face of the host is almost always male. However, those who make the elaborate meals that are associated with *melmastia* are the women in the household, who also may feel their own reputation is at stake in making the guests comfortable. Women also play a role in *nanawatai,* as they have been reported to take part in the ceremonial group that approaches the household of the wronged party in search for forgiveness. A more controversial aspect of *nanawatai* applies to women who flee their husband's household, and seek shelter in someone else's house. Informants were ambivalent as to the appropriateness and validity of such cases of *nanawatai,* and, consequently, the moral obligation of the host to concede unconditional protection to the escapee.

More recent historical factors changed the ways some of these values are performed. For example, some ethnographic accounts (Lindholm 1982, Kakar 2005) indicate that in Pashtun areas of eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan, Pashtun women are not required to keep *purdah* so strictly due to the relatively egalitarian nature of their social environments. However, recent events such as the rule of the Taliban, the influence of Islamist mujahedin groups, general insecurity that puts women at risk, and periods of displacement that made exposure to strangers

[13] This practice is specifically forbidden by the Quran, which was pointed out by Dr. Shahla Haeri. This practice is slowly changing in some areas, as some informants reported a trend whereby, rather than exchange women, families are opting to pay the offended party an amount of money that would equal the brideprice of a girl with similar status. Girls are thus not married into a hostile family, and a young couple is not faced with the prospect of building a marriage out of a conflict. The family still gains a bride, negotiated for separately from an uninvolved family – which will ensure better relationships between the newly-wed woman and her in-laws.

more likely, resulted in a tightening of *purdah* restrictions. As a result, in Afghanistan some women became more restricted in their movements than described in past ethnographic accounts. On the other hand, the difficulties of displacement and conflict resulted in movements of entire families, processes that may have exposed women to interactions with people from outside their community, which otherwise might not have occurred. Economic difficulties and a high number of female-headed households can lead women to seek income. An influx of foreign troops, aid and development organizations also affect the lives and opportunities of the people from this region, modifying the patterns of receiving education, as well as the means for generating income. Additionally, some of the egalitarian equilibrium described in the literature may be disturbed by "warlords" and military commanders who gained power based on status earned in military conflict, or even coercive means during the years of conflict. These more recent changes also seem to be incorporated into "doing pashto": none of my informants, male or female, claimed that they are less able to perform their Pashtun identity well today, even when they considered the changes negative.

Women's expression of Pashto

Ingrid Boesen (1983) wrote one of the earlier descriptions of doing pashto and Afghan Pashtun women in a small village in the Eastern regions. Boesen describes women as largely subordinate to and in fact almost completely controlled by men. According to her, women accept their subordination and inferiority to men, ideas that are supposedly derived from Islam and doing pashto.[14] This acceptance is in accordance with Kandiyoti's (1988) analysis of the traditional

[14] Boesen points out that when the requirements of Islam and doing pashto are not in accord, doing pashto almost always wins out. This was also said to me on several occasions, illustrated by the idea, stated by the few informants

patriarchal system. Within this system, households are generally formed along patrilocal and patrilineal principles, according to which the head of the household generally has the final say in all decisions. Girls typically marry very young and are subsequently under the control of their mothers-in-law. Women, according to this model, internalize their subordination and understand it to exist to provide them protection by male family members. Boesen does recognize short romantic poems, or *landays,* as one area in which women are able to express and assert themselves, as well as the possibility for love affairs, even if not acted upon (albeit at risk of being killed). These are the only means of expressing individual agency Boesen considers, and they exist squarely within existing cultural frameworks.

Kakar (2005) and Grima (1992) both examined the concept of doing Pashto from the point of view of women, although they focus on different themes. Grima, in her ethnography of Pashtun women in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, stresses that Pashto as language and pashto as behavior are inseparable. One cannot be Pashtun without doing pashto and speaking the Pashtun language (also called Pashto): a speaker of the Pashto language is expected to act in ways consistent with the pashto ethical system. Grima distinguishes men's and women's experience of pashto in her description of *badal*. Usually, this is translated as revenge and is to be carried out by men. For women, *badal* refers to exchanges of gifts or visits which cement social networks (Grima 1992: 70-71). It is a way women uphold their own, and their family's honor, through gifts, visits, and the communal expression of emotion.

Kakar (2005) seeks to show how women are both discriminated against, and realize empowerment through pashto. In her view, women's and men's space is so strictly separated to protect the family's honor, which is held by women. Women, and the honor they represent, must

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I knew who actually acknowledged these differences, that "we were Pashtuns before we were Muslims, so we will always be Pashtuns first." This state of affairs can have a negative effect on women's rights, as many Quranic rights for women — e.g. inheritance, divorce, and the illegality of levirate — are not recognized by Pashtuns.

be protected from the danger posed by men who are non-*mahram.* Giving access to the inner house, considered the particular domain of women, shows trust. Prospective wives to be allowed into a household are carefully screened, usually by the most prominent women in the family, as they will be a new element that could have a negative (or positive) effect on a family's honor. Furthermore, there are avenues by which Pashtun women can assume positions of high authority within, and outside, the household. At the political level, a female village leader plays a certain role in holidays and events such as weddings, leading other women in prayer and other rituals. Women might control household resources such as fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and livestock owned by the household.[15] Leading women in the household arbitrate disagreements between each other and children (Kakar 2005: 8).

Restricting women to their homes, or requiring them to cover their faces when they do go out, is understood to reflect women's high value, and is often described as a way to protect and respect them. On women's honor in Pakistan, which is similar if not identical to Afghanistan, Haeri (1999: 64) writes:

> [H]onor is intimately tied to a sense of a "natural" masculine right to control and possess his womenfolk. Objectifying honor in the person of a woman, men possess honor - just as they possess gold or land - the three elements that are said to be the most sought after in Pakistan and thus the root of all conflicts. Logically, it follows, women cannot possess

[15] Several of my informants told me that Pashtun women usually control the family's monetary resources. However, when I questioned specific families (including those whose members told me this), they all said that in their family the women did not control money, although this was so in other families. It may be that few will admit to their own men being too weak to strongly control their wives, hence the frequency with which female control of household funds is said to characterize others' households.

honor in the same way as men. They represent honor; they symbolize honor; they are honor.

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By this reading, the status of representing honor, a value possessed solely by men, turns women into the possessions of men. This does not erase the other areas in which women express their own honor, such as *badal*. They are simply different.

Up to this point, I have focused on the norms of behavior expected among Pashtuns, particularly women. In the remainder of the paper, I seek to demonstrate the ways that norms and life contexts create tension. Specifically, I will focus on the contexts that develop because of the demand for women's wage labor generated by internationally-funded development projects

Desperate Situations

Tahira[16] is a middle aged intermediary; she lives in a village fairly close to Jalalabad and organizes women's sewing projects for an internationally funded, locally administered NGO that supports women's wage generation projects. After receiving training from the NGO and passing her knowledge to home-based producers, she is responsible for traveling to the city with the pieces they sew and selling them to shopkeepers. She also works with shopkeepers to determine the most popular designs, and then teaches these designs to the producers in the village. Tahira's husband was severely injured, along with two of her children, by a bomb blast that occurred several years before I met her. Until that point, she had never worked for wages, and lacked an

[16] All names are pseudonyms.

elementary education. When her husband was injured, she initially did not consider the possibility of employment for herself, and the family lived for some time on the meager earnings of one of the older sons, working at a restaurant in Jalalabad. When NGO staffers proposed the project to the elders of the village, they immediately thought of her distressed situation. Tahira's husband had reservations at first, and insisted upon visiting the organization and speaking with the male head of the project before he agreed.

Tahira, a slightly heavy, short woman with olive skin and a round face, tells me this story sitting in one of the workrooms of the organization's center in Jalalabad. When she speaks she fills the room with her energy, despite a quiet, measured tone. She very rapidly established herself as one of the best intermediaries the organization had trained, and within a year was working independently of the organization, a sought-after outcome for this particular project. She also has come to enjoy the work for its own sake. When asked if she might choose to quit should her circumstances somehow improve, she answered "It is much better to spend my time working, doing something useful."

Another woman, Afia, an office staff member at a different organization, worked for a long period of time with various aid and development organizations, first taking up this work when she was a refugee in Pakistan.[17] A widow, she was supporting three children by herself. Having completed a few years of basic education, she was able to find work with a Western organization that provided aid to orphans. After her return to Jalalabad, she capitalized on this experience and found employment with an aid organization, as well as with the election

[17] It is not uncommon for women to have become affiliated with aid organizations while in refugee camps in Pakistan. Organizations of various sorts proliferated to provide aid, and ranged from conservatively Islamic to Western. For this reason life in the camps seems to have resulted in greater religious conservatism and even radicalization for some, and more openness to the West among others.

commission, before becoming an outreach coordinator for one of the many organizations involved in tailoring and handicraft projects.

Soft-spoken, but like Tahira, attentively listened to by her co-workers, it is obvious, from spending time with her in the office and at handicraft fairs, that she is one of the lynchpins of the organization. Younger (and usually better educated) workers ask her for assistance; amid the hustle and bustle of the workplace she provides a steadying force. Just as Tahira says, Afia insists that even were her husband still alive, she would like to work and help women in her community.

In light of the host of difficulties caused by years of conflict and insecurity, it is not surprising that, like Tahira and Afia, many of the workers were driven by poverty to seek employment with an NGO.[18] This seems to be especially often the case for women, such as intermediaries living in villages, involved in projects that required them to work directly with shopkeepers. A staff worker at a handicraft organization that extensively utilizes intermediaries told me that initially, the women are often criticized by some community members, as the work involves travel and contact with unknown men.[19] One of the younger intermediaries whom I met, Fareshta, declared a preference for seclusion, saying that as soon as her family's financial situation improved, she would stop working and stay home, as this was the ideal life for Pashtun women. She did not feel she should work for wages; that is the purview of men. Fareshta seemed worried about possible criticism, and the fairly high attrition rate among women who begin training as intermediaries is a sign that she is most likely not alone in this feeling.

[18] In Chatty (2000), while privileged women may have been seeking professional work in spheres such as medicine and education since Oman's reforms, the emergence of other women seeking employment (although in this case in menial jobs) was a new phenomenon.

[19] On the other hand, there is a Pashtun saying that holds that "a shopkeeper is not really a man," in order to allow women to buy things from the bazaar should this be absolutely necessary.

These three women share the experience of being pushed into this type of work because of a desperate financial situation, upon which their families' survival essentially depended. In Tahira's case, the decision to work was drastic, a significant departure from what was expected from her in the village, especially as her husband was still living. Afia, on the other hand, grew up in a refugee camp in Pakistan. International aid organizations concerned with women's status influenced her, and shaped her outlook. These two women are both satisfied with their work, and state emphatically that were the situation different, they would continue, both for their own satisfaction and because they are doing something for their communities. Fareshta viewed the situation differently. Perhaps because she was young, although not a teenager (she doesn't know her exact age but guessed early twenties), she wished to stop working. Fareshta, while she must contribute to the well-being of her brothers and sisters, does not have children to support. Although she did not explicitly say so, I wondered if her reluctance stemmed from a fear that as a working woman, she might have difficulty finding a husband — and so have more to lose by appearing to flaunt the established norms of her village.

Fareshta, Afia, and Tahira all understand that they are acting outside the accepted norms of pashto but are not willing to cast pashto aside. Both Afia and Tahira are happy with their work and assert that should they live in different circumstances, they would make the same decision. Fareshta, on the other hand, holds a viewpoint that tacitly questions the goals of the Western-oriented organization for which she works. She asserts that she would rather live within the parameters of the norms of her community, and that she only works because the decision was reached within her family. None of the three women wants to resist pashto, raising the question of how they reconcile their personal ethics with the goals of their organizations, which place great importance on “getting money into the hands of the women” in order to improve their

situations. Fareshta goes farthest of the three toward articulating a critique of that Western feminist secular dogma, when she describes her social situation as being compromised, even as her family's financial situation was improved. At the level of theory, the question arises, How easily can we discern either “agency” or “resistance” while at the same time remaining true as ethnographers to the many, and sometimes conflicting, sources of influence which act upon each woman's life?

Agency and the Lives of Pashtun Women NGO and Development Workers

Talal Asad (2000) defines agency as "an individual's capacity to act consciously and voluntarily on the world" (29). Asad goes on to criticize social scientists' tendency to use agency to "celebrate self-empowerment, history-making, and individualism" while overlooking the limitations of agency as well as the ways in which what might be considered more negative experiences, such as pain, might also result from agency rather than passive suffering. Asad is in accord with Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) in her critique of the tendency of social scientists to seek out the "romance" of resistance in studies of relationships with structures of power. Asad is also in accord with Saba Mahmood (2005) who rejects the assumed universality of self-empowerment and individualism and seeks to locate agency also in actions that appear to submit to dominant structures of power. I recognize these criticisms of defining agency solely when expressed as resistance, as it does not allow for the full range of possibilities one might choose to act upon. However, I also believe it a mistake to deny all trace of resistance when demonstrating that agency is enacted differently outside of the Western, humanistic tradition in which most social scientists are trained. William Roseberry (1989), who is also critical of an overuse of agency as

"heroic resistance" (141) shows how these points of view might be reconciled, in that while an individual's activities are shaped by their cultural background, they can also choose to act in ways that will in the end change this cultural background. Such an understanding of culture gives a wider range of possible actions. These actions are not limitless, but neither are they predetermined.

I believe that speaking about culture as a single entity is mistaken, however. People are shaped by a variety of influences that might be considered part of "culture," stemming from different sources throughout their lives, such as family, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and transnational entities, and this widens the possibility for action. These different sources of influence might work at times in concert and might at times work against each other. When this happens, individuals must make choices, or negotiate the gaps.

A discussion of agency and resistance risks losing sight of what the NGO workers themselves consider important in their lives. It can be all too easy to focus on such abstract ideas, rather than try to let the women's own lives and words speak for themselves to the extent possible. The place which Afghan women hold in the imagination of “the West,” and the extent to which NGO workers are reliant upon international funds and organizations for employment, indicate that these issues do bear on their lives. Western discourses on Afghan women often focus on resistance, and NGO workers often seek support from organizations steeped in this discourse. This is even more the case as the NGO workers are, in fact, engaging in activities that are at odds with many other Pashtuns' understandings of how a "good Pashtun woman" should behave. American and Western attention to the ”woman issue” in Afghanistan became more intense during the regime of the Taliban, in part due to efforts of feminist organizations such as The Feminist Majority Foundation (Farrell and McDermott 2005: 42-43). International military

intervention was in part justified by the Bush administration with the need to "liberate" Afghan women, and First Lady Laura Bush promoted the issue (Hesford and Kozol 2005: 3). The women are very aware of these "big-picture" issues, and know that they can be caught between competing discourses, whether those of development organizations, the Taliban, the Afghan government, tribal elders, or the prevailing viewpoint of their own families. They at times resist, and at times accede, perhaps because they are internally more comfortable with a particular choice and perhaps because they feel threatened, sometimes by Taliban actions, other times by the risk of losing international funding for their NGOs. They also know — although perhaps without using the specific language — that concepts of women's agency and resistance are often important to the internationals who are involved with projects for the ”empowerment” of Afghan women. Expand **on how women working in these NGO understand the 'popular" understanding of second-wave feminism shaping the gendered agenda of these NGO Discussing further the ways NGOs essentialize Muslim societies as patriarchal and how this is understood by local women working for these NGO**

Women's resistance was the subject of at least one study of Pashtun women. In "Conflicts of Solidarity Among Pakhtun Women's Lives," Boesen (1983) looks at *landays,* short song-poems that express women's discord with the dominant, and as she puts it, male tenets that govern Pashtun life. Boesen says the *landays* deal with the "problem of adapting and manipulating social norms and ideals to accommodate individual goals within the framework of possibilities and constraints defined by the social structure" (106), which resonates with my research. Yet, according to Boesen, while *landays* may serve as a counterpoint to patriarchal norms, they never actually change the social structure. I found that the women I worked with were changing social structures, at least in some environments, as they worked outside the home while maintaining that they were proper Pashtun women. By actually changing the structure of their society, even if in a limited way, the stakes seem much higher and the results more obvious

for the women I interviewed. Many Pashtuns recognized their efforts as consistent with doing pashto within the course of their work, including villagers and elders who assist them in providing services. Others in the community disagree, but the intensity of disagreement itself indicates that much is changing — for example, a set of rules appears to be emerging for behavior of Pashtun women within the workplace, although they do not yet affect the street and the home.

Boesen's focus on resistance reflects the academic fashion of the 1980s. Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) has noted that this "romanticization" of small scale resistance that does not change social norms can be problematic if it results in the erasure of certain workings of power. The criticism is partly leveled against her own previous positions, as found in *Veiled Sentiments*, her ethnographic monograph about the lives and poetry of Bedouin women in Egypt. In that book, Abu-Lughod (1986) frames romantic poetry as a form of resistance against a social structure that leaves no room for romance in practice. In her later article, Abu-Lughod (1990) calls for the use of resistance as a diagnostic of power and not, as was the tendency, to use resistance as an indication of the "ineffectiveness of systems of power and the resiliency and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" (41-42).

The resistance paradigm for interpreting agency does not take into consideration the many different experiences that women in any society have, the many different backgrounds they have lived, and the multiplicity of influences that each woman is subject to during a lifetime. A resistance paradigm can all too easily - and spuriously - condense the various forces against which women resist. Positing the existence of one "enemy," even if it is a "system," denies the complexity of what any individual faces, what tries to exert control over them, and what she chooses to resist, in the course of a life. For this reason, Abu-Lughod's critique of the resistance

paradigm is appealing: she acknowledges that multiple strata of power exert themselves upon an individual over the course of her lifetime. The family, the village community, the state, even ever- encroaching Western-style romance and consumerism, now easily reachable through mass media, represent cross-cutting pressures. Can we interpret women's responses to all of these factors as "resistance"? And does everything that is not resistance have to be understood to be "accommodation"? We might, but surely other analytic tools are available to us, which might make it possible to convey more parts of the story and go beyond one-dimensional representations of women's agency.

Another widely-read work examining Muslim women's agency is Saba Mahmood's (2005) *The Politics of Piety*. Mahmood, too, rejects the earlier tendency to emphasize resistance, and instead maintains that one can locate agency also in instances when women seem to be bowing to dominant power structures. Mahmood questions what she refers to as the Western feminist,[20] and liberal humanist, assumption that agency must take the form of resistance of some type against dominant power structures. For some social movements, and particularly groups that exist outside of Western worldviews, agency can be located in submission. Mahmood seems to reject that any action her informants, members of Egypt's mosque movement, take is resistance, while describing her informants as agents choosing to submit. For example, if the women criticize their husbands for acting in "un-Islamic" ways, they are not resisting their husbands' enjoyment of a secular lifestyle but submitting to requirements of the mosque movement, as the hegemony of the religious imperatives seems to supersede that of a patriarchal family structure.

Mahmood's rejection of the resistance paradigm is a step forward but is she correct to

[20] I, like Mahmood herself, am collapsing a myriad of viewpoints into the term "Western feminist" for the sake of brevity and in order to present a clearer argument. Additionally, while Western feminisms are many, in places such as Afghanistan in which there is a strong international development presence, the idea of Western feminism is interpreted basically as gender equality.

reject resistance wholly? In a norm-conflicted world, might not accepting one set of norms mean, by necessity, resisting another? And if we accept that, would not Mahmood's approach be every bit as essentializing as the earlier focus on resistance? A more relevant discussion of agency, and one that does not overly focus on resistance, will take into account the particular historical and social situation in which people live. If Abu-Lughod was at one time too focused on resistance, it can be said that Mahmood overly essentializes the lives of the women she studied by rejecting resistance. In this connection it is perhaps significant that her ethnography lacks description of the many historical and social layers that complicated the lives of the women. Absent from her ethnography, for example, are the political situation in Egypt and foreign influences, among other themes.

Laura Ahearn (2001), writing about Nepalese villagers and the impact of literacy and development discourses on understandings of love and marriage, presents a more balanced conception of agency and resistance. She describes agency as potentially alternating between resistance and accommodation, or even resisting and accommodating at the same time: "[V]illagers, particularly women, physically enact and discursively express their culturally constrained, but never totally negated, agency. ... Resistance and accommodation are always interwoven — there is no such thing as pure resistance" (Ahearn 2001:93). This is a much more pragmatic understanding of agency and resistance, which is better suited to a world that is made up of overlapping and competing viewpoints and discourses. Following Ahearn, I contend that it is never valid to simplify things to the extent that only resistance, or only accommodation, should be recognized. Afghan NGO workers in Jalalabad acceded to certain necessities of doing pashto in order to work outside the home and to maintain their status as Pashtun women. At the

same time, they resisted other aspects of pashto which would have denied them the possibility to work in an office setting.

Wynne Maggi's (2001) description of Kalasha women in Pakistan, in *Our Women are Free*, further highlights the importance of understanding concepts of agency and resistance starting from the perspectives of individuals who are subject to multiple layers of influences and power structures. The Kalasha recognize freedom of women as one of the defining cultural features that set them apart from their Muslim neighbors. This is not to say that there are no constraints on the behavior of women but rather that the people themselves stress that when these constraints become overwhelming, the women have the choice to step outside of them, and sometimes they do. One of Maggi's important points is that the freedom, resistance, or agency of these women depends upon the context in which it is practiced. It is manifested in a particular way among the Kalasha at home but when they leave their valleys and interact with local Muslim Chitralis (the Kalasha practice a pagan religion), or when they interact with tourists and aid organizations, the result is different. The women might be labeled as sexually available by local Muslims, an experience they find disempowering. Conversations with tourists might also have this result, as the women realize just how limited is the geography in which they move. The same can be said for encounters with development organizations that place little emphasis on local knowledge. In other words, layers of social structures and sources of power can cause agency and resistance to be realized in different ways.

Ahearn (2001) further notes that agency can be defined as one's ability to act within one's cultural context. Alidou (2009) echoes this definition in her work with women in Niger, stressing that agency only exists within existing cultural space that allows it to exist. Earlier echoes of this definition are heard in Boesen's description of *landays* as one way women express their

individual selves within a framework of social possibilities and constraints. In the next sections of my paper, these points will become particularly important. Pashtun women might find certain opportunities closed to them for a variety of reasons, whether because of a particular family background, fear of Taliban reprisals, or insecurity because of fighting between insurgents and NATO forces.

If I draw one lesson from earlier approaches to understanding women's resistance versus accommodation it is that agency is always enacted within certain cultural parameters but also within a space that is impacted by global and national influences. The confluence of all these factors is the space in which the women I knew in Jalalabad chose to work with NGOs. The women found themselves both assisted by, and resisting, different layers of influence. Sometimes they might alternately accede and resist depending upon what they were trying to accomplish, as they navigated a world in which they wished to work in an office space, to uphold their reputations as "good Pashtun women," and to ensure their own physical security.

To earlier scholarly interpretations of Muslim women's tacit negotiations of diverse and at times contradictory influences, I add the concept of strategic ambiguity, which differs from the resistance/accommodation paradigm in several ways. Strategic ambiguity enables me to unite rebellious and submissive life-choices under one concept, making possible the give-and-take that actually happens in one's life. Strategic ambiguity also avoids the labeling of women's choices and actions as concretely resistance or accommodation, but rather allows one to discuss how it is that women maneuver between these two seemingly opposed sets of interests, creating a space in which they make varied choices and express varied perspectives. Unable, and unwilling, to completely abandon pashto norms, they also strongly believe that many of the goals and viewpoints of the organizations with which they work can improve the lives of Afghan women

and Afghans in general, as well as their own lives. They thus find it necessary to negotiate what are, essentially, two very different value systems, without necessarily taking sides. Ambiguity, both in referring to and enacting pashto, and in carrying out work tasks and discussing organization goals, allows them to do this without feeling that they are choosing one side or the other. They are good Pashtun women who are working on gender issues, and when they are criticized, they are able to interpret it as misunderstandings on the part of the criticizer, and not because they are violating any norms. They slip between these two roles fairly easily, blurring what may seem like clear-cut norms or rules as they do so. They never broach this subject head on, but rather speak of their actions in fairly abstract ways, so that there is always a slight lack of clarity that provides them space to be good, modest Pashtun women promoting ideals of gender equality - something that seems somewhat paradoxical to anyone who is familiar with life in Pashtun villages in the provinces.

An "Open-Minded" Family

Within Jalalabad, likely due to its position as a regional center, live a number of families who took for granted that the girls would receive an education, both elementary and high school, and possibly university. In most of these families at least one parent (usually the father) was university educated.[21] Some of these women, such as Najhma, can be extremely ambitious. While she ultimately aspires to go to medical school, and while she already completed a degree in business, she has also worked for multiple aid and development organizations.[22] Najhma is

[21] It is worth noting that most of these families indicated that they had been Communist sympathizers in the 1970s and 80s.

[22] While rapidly moving from one position to another might be negatively looked upon in the US work environment, to give the example with which I am most familiar, the nature of development programs in Afghanistan necessitate

part of a developing international NGO elite in Afghanistan. This group is made up of young, educated people who are well versed in the international development sector and easily find successive jobs within this sphere.[23] While most such people I met in Jalalabad were men, Najhma certainly fit the criteria.

Najhma described her family as "open-minded," and said that this was why she was able to study and work. They encouraged her to go to school while they were displaced in Pakistan. However, schooling temporarily ended when they returned to Jalalabad while the Taliban was still in power. As a teenager, Najhma missed most of her high school education, which she later made up by taking private courses. After the Taliban fell, she completed her high school equivalency, and passed the examination to begin medical school. For the first time she encountered interpersonal difficulties that result either from the patronage system, or possibly negative attitudes towards women working in managerial positions or outside the home (Najhma indicated all possibilities). In order to gain admittance, the director of the medical school demanded bribes that she could not pay. Turning her back temporarily on her education, Najhma worked with various international NGOs and organizations, as well as governance development organizations. Najhma never gave up hope of earning a medical degree. Having finished a night school business degree, she has once more been admitted to the medical program at Nangarhar University and has started her studies.

While it appears easy for women to find employment with NGOs — they are actively sought by employers because women are needed to interact with female project recipients — few

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this. Projects are usually funded for a limited time, often as little as six months, and if funding is not renewed the entire staff must then seek employment elsewhere, usually with a different organization that has just received another short-term grant.

[23] This sort of professionalization of NGOs and development has been studied elsewhere - for example, see Phillips (2008) for a description in Ukraine, Hemmet (2007) for a description in Russia, and El-Kassem (2008) for a description in Iraq. While professionalization can serve as a springboard for some, it also has negative aspects. It can result in exclusion of some groups from funds and some individuals from employment, and it can lead organizations to almost entirely shape their missions to please foreign donors.

women are actually allowed or willing to work in a Western-style office environment or travel the roads frequently. However, among the organizations I spent time with, women were almost never given full leadership positions. One reason might be that most organizations recognize the need for a male front-man who will be able to interact with local male elders and power-holders. Another reason, however, may relate to local resistance to women occupying such positions because of a belief that women are by nature not suited for leadership, and not simply that it is inappropriate for them to interact with men. Najhma's narrative was punctuated by instances of discord, in which she had disagreements with male co-workers. She left several jobs because of these difficulties, which seemed to stem from her position as a woman supervising men. The complex cultural influences in which she lives have also impeded her ability to take full advantage of the opportunities offered to her by her involvement with the international community. Najhma was selected to attend an overseas training, and she received her visa, got her father's permission, and seemed set to depart. At virtually the last minute, another family member deemed this type of trip inappropriate, as Najhma would be traveling unaccompanied. The trip was cancelled. Najhma defended her relative, stating "you know, he was young during the Taliban, they influenced him a lot. But he is not a bad man." Realistically, Najhma might have attended, because her father's permission surely trumped the opinion of another family member. She herself was uncomfortable with the discord she might create within her family.

On the surface, Najhma seemed much more confident than the women previously discussed in making the choices she did, and for the most part received little resistance from her family. Being from Jalalabad, rather than a village, and with her family background, she encountered less gossip than the women in the village when she chose to work. However, after repeated interviews the layers of resistance she faced became clearer. Her family, initially

described as fully behind her decisions, was later shown to have developed fissures relating to her work. This resistance caused Najhma to accede and avoid conflict in some cases, and to resist in others. Additionally, her stories referenced several occasions when men impeded her work. In these cases, she almost always indicated she would resist these difficulties, even if only by backing away for a period of time and then trying again. The approval of her family and their belief that she maintained herself as a Pashtun was more important than the opinions of the men who gave her problems as she endeavored to go to medical school or work at the head of an organization.

More sobering was an event that happened right before I left Jalalabad. Najhma received a threatening letter from the Taliban. She insisted that she was brave enough to continue her work, but at the same time, had decided that her work with international organizations should take a back seat to medical school. She also said that while she was working, she would be much more careful when traveling to rural districts. Throughout her career, she found that not only her reputation was threatened but also her physical security. Currently, there exists the possibility that the security situation will deteriorate, especially after international troop withdrawal. Most Afghans I interact with are already worried about the instability that could result. If this is the case, then women like Najhma may find that the space for them to make such choices regarding their careers might narrow and even close, should they decide to stay in the country.

Creating Space of One's Own

Of all the women I spent time with during my stay in Afghanistan, I think that it was Nazifa with whom I formed the closest relationship. Nazifa's situation was somewhat puzzling; hers was so

different from the other women's stories. Nazifa is uneducated and comes from an uneducated family. She doesn't speak English, and knows little Dari, the second official language in Afghanistan along with Pashto. Yet Nazifa was the only woman in Jalalabad I knew who was the head of her own organization, a handicrafts center. Although the organization had been started with the help of two male colleagues, one left to pursue another career path, while the other had a falling out with Nazifa, leading to the creation of two separate organizations. Since then, Nazifa not only runs the organization but does so with a staff comprised only of women.

Nazifa's organization has for several years been successful in getting grants from international donors, training women in handicraft production, and then selling these handicrafts to the foreign Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT, a joint military and civilian unit implemented in Afghanistan and Iraq to provide both security and development) and NGO personnel living in or passing through Jalalabad. Despite her father's and mother's lack of education, Nazifa says they encouraged her to attend school. Nazifa states that she was not interested but, from a young age, developed a love for sewing and embroidery that could not be quelled. Instead of attending school, she would go to the bazaar to look at designs, and come home to practice them. Her reputation spread, despite being a young girl, and people from surrounding areas, even elders, came to buy her clothing. She was "discovered" by one of the international NGOs working in the area, and from that experience went on to found the center.

Nazifa's narrative of her work and her life takes on a mystical quality. The story unfolds almost like a fairy tale. A little girl somehow acquires the knowledge to become very skilled in a craft, with almost no outside help. Despite her parents' objections, she continues with her dream. When asked about how she achieved what she did, she answers: "I had a dream, and you know, God just granted it." Her situation stood out against the lives of the other women with whom I

spoke; I never met another woman from such a humble background in a leadership position. Her assertion that God gave her a gift provides her with a strong argument against any Islamist detractor: Who can go against the will of God? A divine calling is one which cannot be ignored; all of my informants have told me, without exception, that God and religion are extremely important in shaping and guiding their lives.[24] It is so that Nazifa created the space to do what she wishes. The little girl of the story became known in her community and in surrounding communities, and caught the attention of the elders. She was therefore allowed to pursue her own path, and eventually ended up in what she considers an ideal position, that of an independent woman at the head of an organization that she herself started, doing the work that she loves to do, and doing all that she can to help the women of her country at the same time.

Neither compelled to seek wage work by extreme impoverishment nor raised by a professional family to aspire to a career outside the home, Nazifa does not fit either of the two alternative models I presented above: she had to create room for agency on her own. Interestingly, Nazifa seems to encounter the least resistance of the women whom I have profiled, within Jalalabad City. It may bear importantly that, as she operates a woman-only organization, she generally does not challenge rules of gender segregation. Granted, Nazifa has paid a price for her independence. The village from which her family moved is in a region that is known to be one of the most insecure in the area, with a large number of Taliban sympathizers. Nazifa cannot return to her village because of her work activities.

Nazifa's story shows that there are always some people who manage to step outside the bounds of what seems possible within their society. Appadurai (1996: 31) writes of the imaginative space that is to be found in modernity, in the interplay between global influences and

[24] While Islam is important to these women, it is, all the same, pashto that guides how they perform their public morality. Islam is by contrast described by the women as something done personally, a practice that gives them, peace, feeds their souls, and guides their life, but is not displayed openly.

individual agency, and through which people invent their lives. It is this space within which Nazifa is engaged. Agency might be limited by one's background, by what is considered culturally acceptable. One person might always have been subjected to potentially conflicting cultural influences, for example of religion versus ethnic identity. In a globalized world these influences are multiplied exponentially. Nazifa came of age in a country that has long been defined by the outside powers that compete to exert influence over it, and she is aware of this. The limits of agency do not consist of impenetrable borders but rather barriers that most are hesitant to take on. In some cases, individuals do so, and depending upon their strategy, they may be highly successful, such as Nazifa.

Pashtun Women in the Workplace, Creating a New Form of Pashto

The women I worked with were, as shown above, all in particular situations that allowed them the agency to choose to work in NGOs, despite the fact that many community members may not have agreed with this choice. All the same, they seemed determined to act in specific ways to uphold Pashtun norms, even as they stepped outside its bounds. This section will consider some of the ways that NGO workers, after deciding to work, continued to do pashto, even when it seemed paradoxical. They were often unclear as they spoke about which behaviors exactly were required to keep them within the realm of pashto. This sort of ambiguity was, I believe, undertaken to allow them to work in their organizations while subjectively maintaining their identity as "good Pashtun women". They are not necessarily intentionally stepping outside of the bounds of doing pashto, but rather, they capitalize on the already somewhat flexible nature of the system of behavior to create a new form of pashto.

Godreau introduces the idea of "slippery semantics" to describe the ways Puerto Ricans are sometimes inconsistent when applying racial labels, which as a result "leads to a constant variance in the system of classification itself" (Godreau 2008: 8). In relying on inconsistency, racial attribution — overlain with the potential to create conflict, because in Puerto Rico "race" is never just racial but is always also an index of social standing — takes on blurry borders and can change depending upon the particular context of the conversation or the intent of the speaker. In the same vein, Bendix (1990) writes that "the relations between racial meanings and the social meanings ascribed to them...is best understood as a system which is negotiable in conversation and which would appear, in semiotic terms, to be a process that generates social order as much as represents it" (52).

These concepts can be applied to pashto as it is practiced by women NGO workers, although in their case the ambiguity is not exclusively semantic, as it can refer to other aspects of personal conduct and whether or not it is considered an accepted norm. The end result is that, in being somewhat unclear when describing what it means to practice Pashto in the workplace, women NGO workers are not just avoiding the question as to whether what they are doing is permissible or not, but rather tacitly creating a new type of pashto that is appropriate for their lifestyles. In this way, the dynamic nature of pashto is exploited, and women feel assured that they are not really stepping outside of the bounds of the behavior of a good Pashtun woman. Of course, the fact that many Pashtuns might disagree with them is exactly the reason why the shroud of ambiguity, and the plausible deniability of any intent to resist that it makes possible, is strategically necessary.

This ambiguous pashto manifests in many different ways. It is not simply linguistically ambiguous but ambiguous in experience as well.[25] Some women explicitly say that Pashtun women can practice pashto both inside and outside the office but that the actual practices in each place can shift. For example, should a woman have a specific reason to meet a man in the office, this is considered acceptable, whereas outside of the office such a meeting would not be permitted.

Other women refer to showing "the proper respect for men" as a very important aspect of pashto, without explicitly describing what they mean. They might vaguely refer to deferring to men when making a decision, although I saw those same women often assert their opinions strongly with male co-workers. At other times, an anecdote would be recounted that illustrated how a stubborn man could ultimately extract deference from a woman. Najhma told me about an elder who, even though estranged from his daughter, insisted upon keeping the daughter's sewing money. Najhma repeatedly tried to intervene on behalf of the daughter before giving up and stepping away from the issue to retain positive ties with the community. To me, this story is ambiguous: Najhma stood up against the male elder in support of the girl, and only backed off when the situation became untenable with regards to the ongoing work of the organization.

A more common ambiguity-creating tactic involves the creation of fictive kinship relationships around co-workers of the opposite sex. Lara Deeb (2006), in her ethnography of women working for Islamic charities in Lebanon, briefly touches on a sort of fictive kinship relationship that is established between the men and women in these organizations. The

[25] This is similar to the situation described by Kimberley Hart (2007: 358) in Turkey, whereby the distinction between what constitutes an arranged marriage and what constitutes a love marriage becomes blurred. Turkey's focus on secularism and modernity as ideals discourages arranged marriages; however the reality of social life, particular in more rural areas or areas with rural-urban migrants makes this ideal difficult to achieve. To compensate, parents might arrange a marriage but then encourage a romantic relationship to develop between the couple before the wedding. This ambiguity allows for the ideal to occur without overly upsetting the social norms in the village.

establishment of such elaborate relationships to provide for acceptable social settings was also described by Jane Khatib-Chihabi (1993) in the case of Iran.[26] Workers in NGOs and development organizations in the Jalalabad area often relate to each other in a very familial way, establishing the kin-like relationships that make their interactions more proper and acceptable. They spoke of the familial type relations they had but in the office the situation remains ambiguous, unlike other sorts of more highly defined fictive kinship relationships that allow physical proximity outside of the office, in one's home. It becomes apparent that for the workers, the office occupies an ambiguous space, not completely "private" but not public either. For example, a male office manager was explaining circumstances in which a male non-relative could see a woman's face. He sees many women in his office with no difficulty, although he generally would not meet them outside of the office. Yet when he had asked to see his future bride, his mother had categorically disagreed: in that context the intimacy of seeing her face would not be appropriate, and he had to marry his wife sight unseen. Had he fallen in love with a co-worker, though, and convinced his family to allow a marriage, he would of course have seen her. The flex that a heterogeneous social environment introduces into seemingly inflexible rules is illustrated by the contrasting experiences of some for whom work or studies have provided opportunities for a love marriage.

The end result of the practice of speaking about pashto ambiguously, and remaining ambiguous in actual practices of pashto in the workplace, results in women NGO workers remaining secure in the belief that they are maintaining their Pashtun identity. This does not mean that all Pashtuns are in accordance; any practice among any cultural group will usually be contested by at least some members. But for these women, the dynamic, new form of Pashto that

[26] While this example refers to the use of temporary marriages to make one *mahram*, a practice generally only available to shi'as, it does demonstrate the ways that kin or fictive kin relationships are used to make more convenient the difficulties related to strict purdah.

they uphold at work allows them to remain in spaces opened up for women by particular, historically-determined confluences of global, national and local forces.

Conclusion

> While global processes and individual agency undoubtedly are important, their possibilities are conditioned to a large extent by local and national structures, ideologies, and available forms of cultural and other knowledge.
>
> -White (1994: 156)

Pashtun women NGO workers in Jalalabad are pushing the limits of what is considered acceptable behavior by other Pashtun members of their community in Jalalabad City, as well as in villages further afield where many have close and extended family members. The NGO workers are quite conscious of this and often speak of those who do not approve, both within their families and from the outside community. Some have the complete approval of their families, while others find themselves in a contentious situation. Some even keep their work secret from extended family members who they know would not approve, with the collusion of close family members. All are quite aware that they are working at odds with the ideals of those who feel that women should not be in this public forum and that those in opposition make up a large part, if not majority, of their extended community (including not only Jalalabad City but also surrounding rural villages).

Though it refers to Turkish rural-urban migrant women, the epigraph immediately above is relevant for Pashtun women NGO workers as well. Among the globalizing discourses and practices impinging on them are not just outside military and development interventions but transnational Islamic movements. At the same time, local structures and cultural idioms, related to doing pashto, the opinions of tribal elders, and local understandings of the international development interventions, also temper what possibilities are available for these women. Within spaces opened up by these competing factors and discourses, it is the individual agency of the women themselves that determines what course they will choose.

The situation in Afghanistan is changing rapidly, and although I, and the women I worked with, hope that the result will be more stability, current indications unfortunately point to greater insecurity. Should this be the case, and should Islamist/insurgent/Taliban elements manage to gain greater control of Jalalabad and its surrounding regions, the options available to these women could change drastically. The cultural openings provided are predicated on a specific situation in time and space, and as the situation changes, so might the ability for individuals to make particular choices. It is impossible to divine how the situations of these particular women, and the options available to them, might change in different scenarios. But keeping this point in mind brings into relief the fact that the intersection of agency, local beliefs and knowledge, and global influences which have created the particular situation of the women NGO workers' lives now is historically and contextually determined.

Once they choose the course of working for an NGO, many women in Jalalabad insist that they remain within the boundaries of being a good Pashtun woman, meaning that they continue to practice pashto. Their insistence shows that a binary understanding of resistance versus accommodation does not allow for a complete understanding of the complexities they

face in their lives. Overly focusing on resistance essentializes the experience of these women. An approach that reacts against this, and that seeks to show that what certain people strive for in life might not be in line with values that are often considered universal in the West, also risks essentializing their experiences. There is the possibility that in the effort to disprove universals, one might overlook influences in women's lives that are competing and in opposition to one another. In doing so, the women, as they are represented by a researcher, are denied the ability to express belief in more than one of these competing influences. Using strategic ambiguity these pitfalls are avoided, as this framework focuses on how women negotiate the influences rather than trying to label what it is that the women most desire in their lives.

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