‘Picturing Afghan Women’ for Western audiences: The Afghan perspective

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1. Introduction

Soon after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, ‘liberating’ Afghan women became the go-to justification for the United States administration for the war. Critics trace this shift in US political rhetoric about the Afghan war to the November 2001 radio address by the then-first lady Laura Bush dedicated to the topic of “severe repression and brutality against women in Afghanistan” (Bush, 2001).

Scholarly investigations of the media coverage of the Afghan war has taken special cognizance of how Afghan women’s repression under the Taliban and their subsequent so-called ‘liberation’, played out *visually* in Western news media. These have thoroughly dissected how the cause of Afghan women’s repression as justification for war was reified through Orientalist visual discourses in Western news coverage (Said, 1978). The analyses have shown that such Orientalist visual discourses have been recurrent throughout different parts of the ‘West’ – mostly the US, but also Canada, United Kingdom and Western Europe. The ‘un-veiling’ of Afghan women from under their Taliban-mandated burqas was found to be the leading visual metaphor employed in the un-critical media coverage of the so-called war to liberate women (Fahmy, 2004; Jabbra, 2006; Fowler, 2007; 2010; Jiwani, 2009; Mackie, 2012; Verschueren, 2012; Mitra, 2014; Azmat and McDowell, 2015).

What has remained absent over more than a decade of these academic discussions, is the Afghan perspective on the portrayal of Afghan women in Western news media. It is this absence of Afghan voices that inspired the current article. Based on semi-structured, open-ended interviews conducted with Afghan photojournalists for a larger study on photojournalism in post-2001

Afghanistan, this article focuses on these photojournalists' professional practices and perceptions about Western news media's portrayal of Afghan women and how their own practices and perceptions are negotiated vis-à-vis the previously identified Orientalist visual discourses regarding Afghan women.

As 'America's longest war' (CNN, 2017) rages on in Afghanistan, it is important for academic research to include these local perspectives when it comes to understanding the current and future media coverage of the Afghan war. Especially because the media landscape in Afghanistan has changed vastly in the almost two decades which have passed since the US invasion in 2001.

2. Who pictures Afghan women for Western audiences now?

Much of the early academic discussions regarding journalistic and photojournalistic practice in the news coverage of the Afghan war revolved around the issue of embedding. Foreign journalists and photojournalists were regularly stationed with groups of soldiers in Afghanistan and their information gathering and visual representations of the war managed, manipulated and controlled. Scholars as well as individual journalists and photojournalists have criticized embedding as practiced in Afghanistan because of the power to shape journalistic narratives that it gave to the political and military establishments (e.g. Mair and Keeble, 2010; Campbell, 2011). Needless to say these discussions of how news from Afghanistan was reported focused almost exclusively on international journalists working in Afghanistan, with local and regional journalists reporting on Afghanistan only seldom garnering attention (Habibzai, 2010; Khan, 2011).

This focus on international journalists however was not just a function of Western-centrism in academia. The Afghan media industry had been severely undermined under the Taliban regime (Rawan, 2002). Local capacity in journalism generally, and particularly in photojournalism because of a ban on most forms of photography by the Taliban (Dupree, 2002; Murray, 2012), had been at its lowest ebb around 2001. Much of the reporting during the early years of the post-2001 Afghan war were indeed done by international journalists and photojournalists.

Efforts by Western and regional governments and international non-governmental organizations, as well as initiative from Afghans, have since transformed the Afghan media landscape from its undeniably sad state in 2001 (Cary, 2012; Beikart, 2015). The changes for the most part have been for the better[1] with a vibrant media industry catering to most parts of the country (Cary, 2012). A dramatic re-growth in local journalistic capacity has accompanied this positive development in the Afghan media landscape (Brown, 2013; Relly and Zanger, 2017).

Afghan journalists now play a much more important role in producing news from the country *for Western audiences* than they did previously (Eide, 2016). The growth in number and importance of local journalists in Afghanistan who report on their home country for distant audiences mirrors the global trend of growing reliance on 'local-foreign' news-personnel rather than on 'parachute' journalists (Hamilton, 2012). This trend is directly related to the cost-cutting measures in international newsgathering. But it is also related to what Palmer (2018) has termed as a growing 'safety culture' in Western news production in conflict zones since 9/11. This safety culture, Palmer (2018) argues, has given rise to a decision-making mindset among the Western news industry leadership that considers local journalists to be less at risk than their foreign counterparts in conflict zones. It has contributed to increasing reliance on local journalists reporting on post-9/11 conflicts from countries they call their primary or secondary home, for distant audiences, while foreign journalists are kept out of harm's way.

Photojournalism meant for Western audiences from conflict zones has not been untouched by these global trends and local-foreign collaboration to produce images from conflict zones has increased commensurately (Patrick and Kennedy, 2014). Afghanistan is no exception. Through their work for the world's leading visual content providers such as Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, Thomson Reuters and the European Press Agency, Afghan photojournalists now contribute significantly, if not almost exclusively, to how Afghanistan and the Afghan conflict, come to be visually represented to Western audiences (Murray, 2012; Mitra, 2017). Thus, photographing Afghan women is no longer the sole purview, or privilege, of international photojournalists parachuting into Afghanistan for short assignment periods spent as 'embeds'. It

[1] For critical evaluations of media development in post-2001 Afghanistan, see Barker (2008); Beikart (2015). For more focused appraisal of journalistic capacity-building in this period, see Brown (2013); Relly and Zanger (2017). For evaluation of positive and negative impacts of these international efforts on Afghan photojournalism in particular, see Mitra (2017).

is Afghan photojournalists who now largely provide visual content from the country for Western audiences.

The question whether increasing reliance on local news-staff is influencing the visual output of the Western visual content providers is an important one raised by scholars previously (Paterson, 2011; Ilan, 2012; Gursel, 2016). While Ilan (2012) and Gursel (2016) had explored the local and international negotiations that take place at the editorial desks of the global image production behemoths, Paterson had specifically noted regarding international news agencies that "[i]f the[ir] brain…is made up of the central newsrooms…, then the heart is made up of the hundreds of…local journalists and photographers…" raising "the intriguing question of whether local understandings of events and local loyalties ever conflict with the established (globally oriented…) story frames…" (Paterson, 2011: 99-100).

To explore this question within the specific context of the Orientalist representations of Afghan women in Western media, having an overview of previous scholarly investigations of such Orientalist discourses is necessary.

3. How have Afghan women been portrayed previously?

Briefly, the problems surrounding the political manipulation of the cause of liberation of Afghan women suffering under the Taliban regime as justification for the US invasion, can be stated following Ahmed-Ghosh (2003: 1):

> The situation of women came to symbolize to Western military powers a justification of war in the name of freedom of women. But the situation of women in Afghanistan today is not only the result of the Taliban's policies. There is a history over the centuries of women's subjugation. Even in more recent times the Mujahideen's (1992-1996) record is worse than the Taliban's. Thus, one must approach the analysis of women's situation in Afghanistan, not through the ideological formulation of 'before and after' the Taliban, but within the larger historical context of Afghanistan.

The symbolization of Afghan women as victims in need of liberation by Western military powers has not come about without the help of the news media in Western countries substantiating the rhetoric of their political and military leaders through their news coverage. Visual imagery

played a significant part in the reification of this discourse in Western societies. Fahmy (2004) was the first to study the visual representation of Afghan women by a Western news organization in light of the political rhetoric of liberating Afghan women through waging war on the Taliban. She found that photos of Afghan women published by the Associated Press after the fall of the Taliban, showed them as "more involved, interactive, more socially intimate and symbolically equal to the viewer… indicating a change in the Western media's representation of Afghan women". She also noted that this change in representations of Afghan women was "more of a change in the attitudes of Western media than in the situations of the Afghan women, as culturally rooted traditions are not easy to be changed" (p. 105-6).

In 2006, Jabbra noted that the burqa of the Afghan women "emerged as the principal symbol of women's oppression in Afghanistan, of the oppression of all Afghans" (p. 247). Fowler (2007) exposed the historical stereotypes used by British journalists to describe the Afghan war and Afghans, and documented the consequent "medievalisation" of a contemporary war by British media (p. 69-75). She discussed at length how the Western cause célèbre of the repression of Afghan women became the visual center-piece of political and media rhetoric about Afghanistan (p. 189-205).

That issues faced by women in contemporary Afghanistan is often portrayed through Orientalist lenses in Western news media was also taken up by Mackie (2012) in a study of selected imagery of Afghan women in global media and by Jiwani (2009) in the case of Canadian media specifically. In a later book chapter in which Fowler (2010) returned to the issue of media coverage of Afghan women, she noted that though things have changed since 2001 in Afghanistan, what had "not changed is the pro-feminist justification for fighting on (and on) in Afghanistan" based on the manipulative political rhetoric that the war in Afghanistan is to save brown women from brown men (Spivak, 1999).

It is this same justification for 'fighting on' that the author found subtly woven into the visual discourse surrounding a series of photos depicting liberated Afghan women (2014). The photographs showed how the visual narrative of 'liberated' Afghan women was made to serve as justification for the continued presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan beyond the then-current deadline (December, 2014) for US troops to depart from the country. Most recently, Rasul and McDowell's content analysis of two elite US news magazines' images of Afghan women (2015)

found that the magazines "shared stereotypes" and "described Afghan women as weak, dependent, vulnerable, passive, and veiled against their will" (p.33). They also underscored how this representation of women ultimately served to justify the US official policy towards Afghanistan.

In the largest study conducted on visual representations of the Afghan war till date, Verschueren (2012) compared US and Western European news media's visual representations of the Afghan conflict. In his conclusions regarding the relationship of Western 'savior' narratives and visual representations of Afghan women, he noted that while Afghan men were often portrayed as 'belligerents', Afghan women almost always figured in "subordinate or passive roles: as victims of the conflict or as beneficiaries of an aid program" (2012: 129).

Together, these studies have highlighted the continuing pathologies of the Western body politic in general, and Western-centric media in particular, which have allowed the cynical manipulation of the plight of Afghan women to justify the war in Afghanistan. All of these studies can be said to share a theoretical point of departure in their investigation – explorations of the Orientalist mindset (Said, 1978) that still pervades Western imagination. The empirical evidence and arguments presented in these studies show that this mindset not only underlay the political rhetoric of the US and allied countries but was also (re)produced by news media in various Western countries, especially when it came to their portrayal of Afghan women.

4. The case for understanding the Afghan perspective

What has often been understood as a given in the studies reviewed above, is the question of *who* produces these images of Afghan women. The assumption has been that Western visual representations of Afghan women are produced by Western photojournalists. With the responsibility of visually representing Afghanistan for Western audiences now resting almost entirely on Afghan photojournalists, this assumption is no longer tenable.

Verschueren (2012) noted that issues of stereotyping and ethnocentrism in the visual imagery of the Afghan war could change with more participation from Afghans in news production processes since they could suggest "news ways of photographing and representing conflict" (2012: 158-59). Whether or not the inclusion of Afghans can be the panacea to solve the

pathologies of news media when it comes to reporting on Afghan women, was explored by Eide (2016) in her study of news produced by Afghan journalists regarding Afghan women. Through content analysis of news stories produced by the largest Afghan news agency called Pajhwok news agency, Eide (2016) found that "the priority of women seems to be low in most Pajhwok news stories, and prominent men often speak on women's behalf" (p. 124). Eide's study (2016) hints that robbing Afghan women of their agency in news is not the sole purview of parachuting, Western journalists, but may afflict Afghan journalists as well.

The question which arises then is: How do the contemporary Afghan *photojournalists* fare in their visual depiction of Afghan women for Western audiences? Are their professional perceptions marked by the need to consciously challenge Western stereotypes about Afghan women through "new ways of photographing and representing" (Verschueren, 2012: 159); or are their practices subsumed entirely by the editorial power wielded by the "brains" of the central news-desks of Western news agencies (Paterson, 2011: 99) – the "nodal points" within the news organizations which act as "global image-brokers" (Gursel, 2016)?

These questions are explored in this study through three specific queries:
RQ1) How do Afghan photojournalists describe their day-to-day practices when it comes to photographing Afghan women?
RQ2) What are their perceptions regarding how Afghan women have been and are depicted in Western media?
RQ3) What are their perceptions about their own visual representation of Afghan women for Western media?

5. Study Details and methodology

The current article is based on findings from individual, semi-structured, open-ended interviews conducted face-to-face with 20 Afghan photojournalists in Kabul in September-October, 2014. The interviews were conducted for a larger study exploring the professional world of Afghan photojournalists in post-2001 Afghanistan. With the aim of having an inclusive sample of Afghan photojournalists, the criteria used to select participants was to contact Afghan nationals who were working or had worked as photojournalists in post-2001 Afghanistan. The primary selection was not based on age, seniority, employment status or gender. Potential participants

were contacted with the help of the Afghan Journalist Safety Committee (AJSC) – a Kabul-based Afghan civil society organization – who hosted the author during his stay in Kabul. Independent contact with a photography and photojournalism training center in Kabul to recruit participants, as well as snowball sampling through the respondents themselves, were also used to reach participants. Seventeen of these photojournalists were men and three women. The guiding schedule used for the interviews consisted of 44 different queries related to the professional practices, role perceptions and image production processes of Afghan photojournalists. However, it included specific questions regarding their practices and perceptions surrounding portrayal of Afghan women. This study is primarily based on responses by the photojournalists regarding the last topic but also includes responses to specific follow-up questions and relevant answers to other queries where the interviewees touched upon this issue within a different context. The full interview schedule is included in Appendix 1.

As part of the ethical guidelines[2] followed in this study, the participants' names and employing organizations are confidential. The participants are referred to by a randomly assigned but consistent number between 1 and 20 in the rest of this article. Among these 20 photojournalists, 18 individuals (16 male and 2 female) had been engaged in producing images for Western audiences directly through their work for Western news organizations or indirectly through an Afghan news organization which supplied images to Western news outlets. The other two interviewees (one female and one male) were photojournalists who worked for Afghan news media with primarily Afghan audiences. Findings from these two interviews are included in this article to provide important counterpoints where necessary. More details about the respondents (with identifiable information removed) can be found in Appendix 2.

Following the interviews, the transcripts were thematically analyzed to find recurring patterns in the interview responses. Thematic analysis is used most frequently in interview transcript analysis to go "beyond counting explicit words or phrases" to identify and describe "implicit and explicit ideas" or meanings expressed by individuals (Guest et al., 2011: 10-11). The interview transcripts were analyzed both through an inductive process of identifying emergent themes not

[2] As a study involving human participants, this research was reviewed prior to commencement and received non-medical research ethics review approval under the Tri-council Policy Statement 2: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (2010) of Canada, from the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board of the University of Western Ontario, under file no. 105378.

previously expected as well as through a deductive – prior data or research-driven – process (Boyatzis, 1998: 99). Such 'hybrid' thematic analysis is particularly useful in research contexts such as the current one, where much might be known about the background of the phenomena being studied but not enough is known about the specific phenomena under study (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

6. Picturing Afghan women – the Afghan perspective

Exploring the issues surrounding the visual portrayal of Afghan women from the ground-up perspective of Afghan photojournalists who produced these images yielded a complex picture. The findings showed that the Afghan photojournalists' practices and perceptions when it came to picturing Afghan women diverged in certain ways from their international counterparts but also had similarities. It also shed light on ethical concerns not previously discussed in research on portrayal of Afghan women in Western news media.

6.1. Afghan photojournalists' practices

The picture which emerged from the Afghan photojournalists' descriptions of their day-to-day practices regarding photographing Afghan women, pointed to how the very act of photographing Afghan women is a fraught issue in Afghanistan with serious risks for both the women photographed and the photographers.

The Afghan women who are photographed run the risk of receiving negative reactions to their image being circulated in public. This negative reaction often comes from their own family, and can even lead to wider social ostracization. Ten of the 20 respondents discussed how intolerance towards women showing their faces in public, even in photographs, makes photographing Afghan women a deeply problematic issue. Respondent 17 described the situation,

> …here in Afghanistan, the women, they don't want to be in the picture. When they don't want to show their faces…how can they be in [a] picture? Some women, they are not wearing the burqa, still they are saying if our relative[s] see our picture, in the TV or in the newspaper, 'they [will ask] me why … you are in the newspaper?' They don't have any answer for that. It's kind of…like shame for that woman. 'Do you know why your picture is there?' and she [would] have no answer for that.

Respondents discussed how hardline interpretations of Islam and lack of education among the Afghan population create such opposition to photographing Afghan women. The ban on photography, particularly of women, by the Taliban was also extensively discussed by the respondents as a reason why the intolerance towards photographing women continues in post-2001 Afghanistan. Others pointed to an even longer history in Afghanistan of intolerance towards photographing Afghan women. Respondent 11 described in detail the historical event in Afghanistan in early 20th century where photographs of one particular Afghan woman, and subsequent negative reactions from sections of the Afghan society, played a pivotal role in Afghan history. He mentioned how photographs of the then-Queen Soraiya of Afghanistan not wearing veil while on tour in Germany, were used by the British in India to foment rebellion in Afghanistan against the reformist and pro-German Afghan monarch, Sultan Amanullah[3]. According to him, "the picture hate" in Afghan society "[came] from that [historical event], not from the religion…."

In such a scenario where familial honor, religion and history are intertwined with photographs of Afghan women, the *act* of photographing Afghan women was not only a risk for the Afghan women photographed but according to these respondents, *one of the most serious security issues* faced by Afghan photojournalists. To put this in perspective, it should be remembered that Afghanistan is a country where the ongoing conflict, corrupt politicians and warlords, the Afghan military and other security personnel as well as the Taliban and the so called Islamic State, have made it one of the worst places to be a journalist in the world (UNESCO, 2018). But in the experiences described by the photojournalists, photographing Afghan women brought its own dangers. As Respondent 10 described,

> I was taking a photo of a very old lady, who had a very colourful dress, coming down from mountain, I checked my [surroundings] … and I didn't see anybody…looking at me, I took some photos and (slaps hands together) I realise[d] a man has [seen] me. And then he shouted to the village, and from village, many people came with AK 47. And they wanted to kill me.

[3] See Edwards (2006: 111-136; especially 133-135) for a more detailed description. For more on how the visual culture in Afghanistan successively progressed in the twentieth century, see Rawan (2002); Edwards (2013: 47-65).

Not only could photographing Afghan women make you a target of angry, and armed, mobs, it could also make you a target of the other sources of threats that exist for Afghan journalists in general. As Respondent 6 said,

> When we take pictures of women, we face different clashes, even from police officers, asking why you are taking picture of wom[e]n, it's not allowed… mostly we avoid taking pictures of women…because of the cultural problem. Because two or three times, I went to jail… because people attack[ed] me [for] taking pictures. Even the woman [was] in burqa, you know their face was not in view but they attack[ed]…me and in one case, they wanted to break my camera…."

One of the three female photojournalists interviewed[4], respondent 4 mentioned how photographing Afghan women could bring censure from a wide range of sources including the Taliban and even her professional peers,

> Things are very sensitive when it comes to women and photographing women. And you have to use sometimes your judgement, when to stop, forget it, or when it's the time to go… I have been told by others [and] they keep telling me that…I shouldn't show women['s] body and they say that this may cause serious problem[s]…Sometimes I don't use my name because they will find me (laughs)…if some Mullahs or Taliban sees it, there will be problem for me…There were a couple of times I was told even by some photographers, that I should take…that [down] from my website…

Interestingly, four Afghan photojournalists felt that as Afghans they were more liable to be targeted while photographing Afghan women than international photojournalists were. For example, Respondent 11 said that when it came to taking photographs of women,

> in some places, people do not like Afghan photographers because they believe that the photograph will be [seen] inside Afghanistan. And everybody will see it and it will be a shame…. And everybody think[s], 'ok, if somebody take my picture, or my wife['s] picture… maybe it goes everywhere', and it's a shame.

[4] The two other female photojournalists, respondent 7 and 20, both described at length how working as photojournalists as women was itself a constant problem for them, whether or not they were photographing Afghan women, because of socio-cultural constraints placed upon Afghan women working as professionals.

That the very act of photographing Afghan women can be controversial in Afghanistan resulting in severe repercussions for the photographed Afghan women and the Afghan photographers, has been absent in previous academic discussions on picturing Afghan women. When controversies surrounding the act of photographing has been mentioned at all in this context, discussions have mostly revolved around the Taliban's ban on photography, including those of women, that was in effect roughly between 1996 and 2001[5]. What was found by approaching the issue from an Afghan perspective however, is that even after the Taliban had been driven from power in Afghanistan, photographing Afghan women continued as a risky endeavor for all concerned. This adds another layer of ethical concern on the already understood to be problematic representations of Afghan women in Western media. Lives are often at risk when it comes to producing the Orientalist visual metaphors of liberation or repression of Afghan women consumed by Western audiences.

6.2. Afghan photojournalists' perceptions of Western media

Another missing piece within previous discussions on visual representation of Afghan women has been the perspectives of the Afghan photojournalists regarding how Western news media pictures Afghan women. A high level of awareness regarding the Orientalist stereotypes employed by Western media in representing Afghan women, was found among the Afghan photojournalists interviewed for this study.

While taking photographs of Afghan women was seen as an inherently risky proposition, nine respondents perceived images of Afghan women to be prominent in international representations of Afghanistan. While three of these respondents felt Afghan women, especially in burqa, were sought out by international photojournalists to photograph, six respondents mentioned that Western news organizations they catered to indirectly, or editors situated at regional desks or at the headquarters of the news agency they worked directly for, demanded photos showing Afghan women. It is also revealing that respondents 7 and 8, who worked for news organizations catering to local audiences, did not mention such editorial demands placed upon them. One

[5] See Dupree (2002) for a discussion of how the iconoclasm of the Taliban *gradually* hardened over these years.

respondent with decades-long institutional memory of the Western news agency he worked for, remembered how this demand spiked soon after the Afghan conflict was framed as a war to liberate Afghan women. "After the fall of the Taliban, all [media] people love[d] to find people without burqa. They want[ed] to see women without burqa", Respondent 17 said.

However, he went on to mention that in his personal experience, wearing a burqa was a complex choice which was not always a good clue as to the status enjoyed by women in their family or society,

> [For] example, in my family, nobody wear[s] burqa[s], only my mum. But she is…more than sixty. Most of the time when I am telling her, 'why you are not taking [off] your burqa', she's saying, 'I cannot walk without my burqa. First of all it's my friend, if I take it out, then I am thinking everybody's looking at me.' (Laughs) … Most of the Afghan women, they are not forced to wear them, the burqa, but they are comfortable with [wearing] that."

Respondent 10 also noted both the demand for, and the ambiguity inherent in, taking pictures of Afghan women without their faces covered as proof of "women['s] participation in society",

> That's lie, you know that's lying…. I was tasked to take photo [at] the time that the women are in the bazaar, which is not true. Yeah, it could be true, but that's not always. And only those photos will be shown – women in bazaar. Which is not true. It's kind of psy-ops[6].

As Afghan women themselves, two of the three female respondents discussed how the reality faced by women in Afghanistan is not adequately represented in their portrayal in Western media. Respondent 4 thought that the changes in the status of Afghan women in post-2001 Afghanistan were superficial and that any claims as to substantial changes in the position of women in the end "…was just talking…examples, examples and talking".

Respondent 4 also mentioned how disillusionment with Western news media's coverage of Afghanistan had prompted her to leave her role as a photojournalist to work primarily on long-form photographic documentary projects. She described how while shooting for these projects

[6] Psychological operations

she is now able to be more careful to mitigate risks inherent in photographing Afghan women not only for herself but also for her female photographic subjects,

> To document, to photograph women is stressful in itself for me…but sometimes I take picture and they say 'oh, it's ok if you publish that'. Not in Afghanistan! Then it gets to the internet. And I tell them, 'do you know internet?'… This is stressful, everything is stressful. Because I know I don't want to put anybody else's life at risk too.

Like her, some of the male respondents were also sensitive to the problems faced by women they photograph to meet international demands. They noted the public shame faced by women if their photographs are circulated within Afghanistan and mentioned how it would be the women whose photographs are taken who will in the end face problems more than the photojournalists. Respondent 10 described what the effect for a woman might be,

> if the photos of a [woman] get very popular then the [woman] will receive many, many negative comments from the society, even she will lose many, many chances.

The discussions by the Afghan photojournalists as to the mismatch between the reality of women's status in Afghanistan and their visual depiction, particularly regarding their choices to wear burqas or not, points to how the Afghan photojournalists were keenly aware of the constructed nature of Afghan women's depiction internationally. For the female respondents, this awareness also stemmed from their own personal experiences. In addition, both female and male photojournalists showed sensitivity to an inherent irony in picturing Afghan women for Western media. Photographing them to validate the idea of their liberation in post-2001 Afghanistan meant exposing those very same Afghan women to persecution that continues to exist for Afghan women. The question which arises from this is whether such awareness and sensitivity meant any changes in how Afghan photojournalists represent Afghan women for Western audiences.

6.3. Picturing Afghan women – Afghan photojournalists' self-reflection and preferences

The Afghan photojournalists were asked open-ended questions regarding how they would want to depict Afghanistan to Western audiences as well as encouraged to think and talk about how they portray Afghan women in the photographs they produce.

The responses by seven Afghan photojournalists in these contexts closely resembled how Afghan women have been noted before as often depicted in Western media – either as victims or as 'liberated'. Among these seven respondents, three respondents described their ongoing, or preferred, portrayal of Afghan women as victims of repression. For example, Respondent 13 said that he would like to show photos of "wom[e]n…faced with…violence" to an international audience. When he was asked to further explain his choice, he mentioned that his choice of this topic was partly because a photo feature he had done in the past on this topic "got the second place in the world, got second ranking…" in an international photography competition.

That international demands played a role in how Afghan photojournalists portrayed or wanted to portray Afghan women was also true in the case of the five respondents who mentioned their preference for photographing 'liberated' Afghan women and girls showing them as taking part in society fully or playing professional roles. For example, Respondents 6 and 16 echoed each other in saying that photos of girls attending schools is something that Western audiences need to see. These photos where the underlying visual discourse was of the 'liberation' of these Afghan women in post-2001 Afghanistan were also in high demand from Western media as evidence of progress for Afghan women during these years, according to respondent 2. "Women['s] businesses, …women['s] development in the provinces, handicrafts of women," were topics on which photos were often demanded by Western media clients, according to him.

However, the need to gain international recognition or the need to cater to international demands when picturing Afghan women as victims or as liberated were not the sole motivation for all photojournalists. Personal experiences and self-reflexivity about visual representation of Afghan women also played a part for some photojournalists.

Both the female respondents who catered directly or indirectly to Western audiences as photojournalists, mentioned that the gender inequality that they experienced themselves, motivated them in trying to show the problems faced by Afghan women in their photographs. Just as Respondent 4, another female photojournalist, respondent 20 described at length the

gender discriminations she experienced in her personal and professional life and said that she felt the need to take photographs

> which show the difficult life of Afghan women…how many hardships an Afghan woman faces during her life. Social problems, economical problems, family problems and violence, domestic violence against women. I want to show this through the media [so] that people realize that it's enough…no more violence against women. I am…trying to show those kind of pictures. To show people that men and women are equal.

In addition, a male photojournalist, Respondent 11's account was full of examples of hard-won access to women's domains in Afghan society to photograph them. He described how gaining these accesses is important to him so that he can balance images of Afghan women from hospital wards housing victims of domestic violence with photographs from all-female social gatherings in Kabul where Afghan women can escape social constraints placed upon them. His drive to depict both the plights and joys in Afghan women's lives stemmed from the need to create an alternative but equally true portrayal of Afghanistan for Western audiences as a place where people lived their lives much as elsewhere: "to just show to the world, that we are normal people as well", he said.

Notwithstanding these exceptions, by noting their ongoing or preferred use of Afghan women as visual 'symbols' rather than active agents of their own destiny, it is remarkable that a number of the Afghan photojournalists showed little divergence from how Western media has been noted by scholars and critics to picture Afghan women.

At a superficial level, this seems a blatant contradiction. The understanding that images of Afghan women had been used to reify Orientalist discourses in Western news media was evident among many of the respondents. The awareness that showing images of Afghan women, with or without their burqas, did not necessarily reflect the realities faced by Afghan women in their day-to-day life was also common among the Afghan photojournalists. Even just the risks surrounding photographing Afghan women mentioned by the respondents would, it would seem, turn them away from photographing Afghan women. Yet photographing Afghan women was important to them. Below I discuss why such a paradoxical situation could exist.

7. Discussion

As can be seen above, the perspectives of a number of Afghan photojournalists about how Afghan women are portrayed showed both divergence and convergence with how Western media is known to picture Afghan women. While they showed remarkable awareness regarding stereotypical representations of Afghan women, when it came to their own portrayal of Afghan women, the types of images mentioned by them were often remarkably similar to how Western media has traditionally portrayed Afghan women. How can this ambivalence to be explained?

I posit that it can be seen as related to the lack of editorial power of the Afghan photojournalists within the global image production industry. Previous ethnographic research conducted within news organizations that control visual news content in the world market (Paterson, 2011; Ilan, 2012; Gursel, 2016) has laid bare how selection of news images is a process of negotiation among the staff of these "global image-brokers" (Gursel, 2016). These studies have shown that decision-making power in their image production processes lies at organizational "nodal points" (Gursel, 2016) i.e. the editorial desks situated in the headquarters in Western countries staffed by Western editorial personnel. However, these researchers have also noted that complex local-international negotiations while selecting images *may* take place (Paterson, 2011: 99-100) through the "layering of imaginations" (Gursel, 2016: 164) by both locally-based photojournalists and the photo-editors situated at the nodal points. But most Afghan photojournalists lacked the editorial power to take part in such negotiations over image-selection and consequently their own perceptions played only a limited role within the image production process.

Seventeen of the 18 photojournalists who supplied images for Western news media mentioned that their images were influenced by editorial and aesthetic considerations of what Western news organizations, and audiences in Western countries, want to see, rather than their own preferences. Some typical responses were,

> [I am] mostly interested in these stories [that he routinely covered], because international people are interested in such stories, so [I] want to show such stories. (Respondent 13)

> I am thinking …about th[is] other side of [the] world [where] guys who are reading newspaper[s], magazines, online [news], what [are] their needs. (Respondent 18)

The employment status of the Afghan photojournalists directly impacted their level of negotiating power in image selection. Two respondents showed the greatest degree of self-reflexivity regarding portrayal of Afghan women and also mentioned their efforts to challenge the dominant representations of Afghan women for Western audiences. Both were also well-established photojournalists who had carved a niche for their photographic work in the international arena. Consequently, they exercised a much greater degree of editorial power. In total, only three respondents among the Afghan photojournalists interviewed, held supervisory roles in their news organizations. Even these three described their editorial power as relatively low, because the position they held within the pecking order of the international visual gatekeeping chain (Bissell, 2000), placed them below other nodal points such as regional bureaus and international headquarters of the news organizations they worked for.

Only four others among the 18 who worked for Western news organizations, even held full-time employment. Not surprisingly, these respondents were the most content with their current pay and employment conditions. The others were not. Among these, five were full-time photojournalists at an Afghan news agency where most of them felt they were underpaid. All the others were freelance photojournalists who said that they earned precarious livings through their photography. Even among the most senior of these freelance photojournalists, there was a shared sense that they faced barriers to access the international market directly as freelancers, limiting their ability to influence image-selection. Typical responses were,

> For example, we put our pictures on [a] website, but…since we don't have the facilities to sell our pictures, the relations to show our pictures to those who want to buy our pictures…we haven't been…successful to sell our pictures, and we have sold only a few of our pictures to other people…. (Respondent 12)

> [I]f I take a photo… I have to sell it to another photographer, and the photographer will send it to the media. The media will send four thousand dollars to him and he will send to me one thousand dollars. (Respondent 10)

With such lack of ability to take part in the image-selection processes, suggesting "new ways of photographing and representing" (Verschueren, 2012: 159) Afghan women for Western audiences, I argue, remained a difficult proposition for most of the Afghan photojournalists. This, in turn, can be understood as the reason why Orientalist stereotypes in portrayal of Afghan women may continue in images produced by Afghan photojournalists.

The demands placed upon them from Western employers and audiences, and the need to bow to such demands unequivocally to earn a living as photojournalists under extremely difficult circumstances (*Cf*. Mitra, 2017), created the conditions where continuing to feed such Orientalist discourses regarding Afghan women, had become part and parcel of the photojournalistic work of many Afghan photojournalists. This in spite of the risks posed both to Afghan women and themselves by Western media's continuing demands for photographs of Afghan women, and their awareness of the constructed nature of such images. Without changes in their employment conditions and the level of editorial power most of them are able to wield, the mere inclusion of Afghans within the global news image production industry cannot sufficiently challenge the existing fallacies of how Afghan women are visually represented to Western audiences.

8. Conclusion

At the time of writing, the US is trying to resolve its 'longest war' (CNN, 2017) through peace talks with the Taliban. The possibility that the Taliban might return to political influence in Afghanistan, even as the Islamic State widens its presence in the country, is real. Concerns about the status of women in Afghanistan in the near future are rising, not least among Afghan women themselves (Gharib, 2019). As such, it is germane to open up the discussion on how Afghan women are represented, and will be represented, in Western news media.

By approaching this topic from the ground up and by shedding light on the topic through the perspectives of Afghan photojournalists who are now responsible for much of the visual coverage of Afghanistan for Western audiences, this article presents an important empirical update on previous critical investigations of Western media's pathologies regarding Afghan women. Unfortunately, the article can only paint a pessimistic picture. The findings show that in spite of a change of guard among the photojournalists, the first gatekeepers in the production of

images of Afghan women, the images themselves might continue to validate Orientalist visual metaphors regarding Afghan women in Western news media if changes do not occur further up the visual gatekeeping chains of the global image-brokers who dictate what we see from Afghanistan.

Western audiences and the global image-brokers can help mitigate risks for Afghan women and Afghan photojournalists caused by their demand for photographs of Afghan women. The Western news organizations can also support Afghan photojournalists through better financial remuneration and by allowing greater editorial agency for them. In this way, global audiences can potentially benefit from these photojournalists' self-reflexivity and awareness about local realities. When it comes to such awareness potentially correcting past biases in representing Afghan women, the voices of those Afghan photojournalists captured in this study, who through their images were actively seeking to challenge dominant narratives regarding Afghan women, provide some hope.

However, of all the emergent discussions from this study, the one that deserves immediate attention is how the West's continuing self-aggrandizing narrative of being saviors of brown women from brown men (Spivak, 1999), jeopardizes lives. The need for continuous visual validation of this narrative is fueling violence not only against those who provide the supporting images, but is also complicating the lives of the very women purportedly being saved. This ethical concern inherent in how Afghan women have been and are being pictured for Western audiences has remained hidden within critical discussions for far too long.

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