Thoughts from Afghanistan: Rebuilding community in complexity

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Abstract

This personal reflection shares four vignettes from the author’s field journal while on assignment in Afghanistan. Note 1 shares the thoughts (with permission) of a few of her female Afghan colleagues; Notes 2 and 3 share experiences from field work day-to-day; and Note 4 closes with a reflection about some of the larger socio-political complexities that may tacitly underpin humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan. This reflection piece offers no answers, only musings.

Keywords: Afghanistan, autoethnography, humanitarian intervention, international aid, reflexivity in qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

This article shares a series of four personal reflections, accompanied by photo vignettes, from my field journal written while in Afghanistan in 2012. At the time, I was working as a lead female researcher in Kabul for a local non-governmental organisation. One Sunday afternoon, a series of targeted explosions were launched throughout Afghanistan, killing over 50 Afghan citizens and injuring 25. That day, our team had planned to depart to a southern Afghan province to conduct field interviews, but due to the explosions, our plans were postponed indefinitely. I, therefore, had the time and opportunity to interview my Afghan colleagues about their position in, and view about, Afghanistan. The Note 1 comprises their responses, the following three are my personal reflections arising from those conversations.

NOTE 1: CONVERSATIONS WITH FEMALE COLLEAGUES AFTER THE APRIL 2012 ATTACKS

Monday, 16 April 2012

In the research office, 23 h after the attacks, with our field work effectively stalled. All commercial and charter flights to the field province have been grounded, it’s impossible to depart, due to security concerns. Although security concerns and explosions are not necessarily new occurrences, the scale of this weekend’s explosions are the explosions targeted buildings/quartiers that had been previously deemed ‘safe’. So, we are using caution. We are on lockdown [Photo 1].

Four of the national female staffers and I sit in the gated driveway area to enjoy some sun after lunch. As time normally permits, we share personal pleasantries. But this afternoon – perhaps because we had more time or because

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Photo 1: Darulaman Palace, Kabul. Darulaman (literal translation ‘abode of peace’), a palace built strategically on the highest urban peak in 1924, just outside Kabul. Having been bombed and set on fire multiple times in the struggles to overtake the country, it now symbolises to Afghan people their country and their wars: still standing, despite adversities
security was at the forefront of our minds – today, our exchanges became more personal. I wrote as much down as I remembered from this lunchtime conversation. The women reviewed and then added their own words. They have allowed me to share, and I thank them for trusting me enough to listen [Photo 2].

S

‘Life is difficult for Afghan women. I have no hope. My daughter, I see she is . . . how do you say it? Sad, depressed. I know why she is like that. All Afghan women, I think, are depressed. There is too much oppression in the culture, and where is our future?

Islam is good. In Islam, women have rights, but husbands and men don’t listen.

It’s the culture. More than just our culture. All of how it goes must change: [in] Pakistan, Europe, Russia, the U.S. . . . For hundreds of years, Afghanistan has been at war, maybe will always be at war. It maybe still at war 200 years from now . . . .

‘Hope is not realistic for me in my lifetime, or my daughter’s lifetime. I don’t know what to say, war has outlasted my generation. The main concerns and needs of women are rooted in economic problems, family conflict, unemployment, low levels of education, lack of knowledge and security. There may be no schools, and there is no work. The reasons for all of these problems are poverty, we have no control and illiteracy . . . .

In Afghanistan, especially in rural areas, women are under the pressure of men. They have less access to education, and from the past up to now they are under the intimidation of men. They can’t come to women’s affairs departments or police when they face problems, because we fear that the men in their families will hit them. We [women] used to be well educated, we used to read, go to work, buy food at the store, but that was many years ago . . . . Because [now] we don’t know any different, and because there is no opportunity, the system for us will always remain backwards.

All [of] these concerns and needs have negative effects on peace and security. This causes migration, like to Iran, Pakistan and other neighbour countries, and addiction to drugs. One reason for addiction to opium is the unemployment and poverty. Also, there is often not any hospitals to treat women. Women might hurt from the pain. So, opium helps. Even if we know opium is not good.

Whenever a problem occurs, even if women feel they can go to law court, they will not have enough money to solve the problem. Especially if a family is in conflict, it is the man who controls the money. Of course, he will never pay . . . .

Revolutionary groups have [an] easy time recruiting men because they provide security and money for food and sometimes work. There are not so many options for women. There are projects that employ women like tailoring, sewing, growing plants, feeding livestock, making honey, chicken farming, drying fruit, looming [rug making]. But some people don’t want women to work and don’t want to see these [projects] because [they] belong to foreigners and they don’t know about the future. What will happen with the withdrawal of foreign forces? Who will protect these projects and who will know how the machineries run? I do not trust that the government has the interests of women’ [Photo 3].

R

‘The men complain about the food we cook – they say our meals are not good. But it’s because we are not permitted at [the] market to buy the food. We don’t select the vegetables for quality’ [Photo 4].

N

‘I would say that in Kabul, 80% of the women do not feel safe in their own homes – there is violence [at home and in the community]. You also do not know who may be reporting on you or your husband, or watching your activities, or what [plans] your husband may choose. So, you have to listen and follow ways that you may not want. Maybe the husband wants [things a particular way], but you cannot ask. It’s not safe. It causes enemies . . . . and a lot of tension, and there is really no one at fault, but it becomes easier to hate who you know.

Even in Kabul, women can’t work without [the] permission of her husband, father, elder brother, etc. . . . In Afghanistan, the 34 provinces (there are only 3 that I have not been in) I would say it’s worse than Kabul, like 99%. Kabul is still moderate, but the women in other provinces still cannot go out and they have no authority in the home . . . .
Even in government, there are women on high levels in government offices. Women hold about 20% of authority in government, they are very educated women. In many places, they are more educated even than the men, but they are not given the proper authority their positions should have. They are in office, but they have no power. So, when the government does not recognise or give examples of honouring a woman’s authority, how can family elders (fathers, brothers, husbands) follow?

Men will never give power to an Afghan woman. The only power a woman has is over her husband, [is] in the home. Even then, he will do what he wants. Men do not listen. Not to Islam, so why his wife? Islam gives many rights to women, but Afghan culture and people take away those rights.

For example, if a 13-year-old girl is violated, her father (because of shame) makes the family migrate to another area. This is better than for her to marry, but her father cannot go to the government or the law/police because of shame. This is a cultural problem. How to make it change? No men [in positions of authority] will talk or listen.

Some families do not want girls in school because of this problem. It is a very big problem for Afghan families: what happens when they [walk] unprotected? In villages, there is no protection for girls. This is why, in villages and districts, girls do not go to school. There must be safe roads and high walls for protection, but right now there is not enough. In villages, few people go to school because of this problem” [Photo 5].

‘I and all Afghan women are very angry about this problem. Our culture is the main obstacle for solving it. I hope that when our daughters are no longer youth, that time solves this problem. I love my daughter and I do not want my daughter to face the problems that I have had.’

The women have finished their thoughts. We sat in silence as N finished her tea. As we stood to leave, I felt that I wanted to acknowledge our exchange on a different level.
I said that I enjoyed this afternoon’s conversation. I reflected that perhaps cancelling our plans was not the biggest problem after all, and I wondered out loud if what we have to say between us might contribute? The women said that why not? Conversations are maybe all they can have. I searched for a way to close the conversations: ‘What can I do? What do you want me to say [to others]? What do you want people to know?’

S smiled and looked at others. She said, with a laugh, and with arms outstretched: ‘bring a biiiiiiig plane. For all the women. We will go’ [Photo 6].

Written in Kabul, April 2012

NOTE 2: A LETTER TO A FAMILY IN THE WEST, ON BEHALF OF SHAMSHAD

Sent to a family on an unspecified date, 2015

While in Afghanistan, I volunteer at a home for children. I often hear my colleagues say they hope this generation will end war. I hear grandparents say that war has outlasted their generation, and I hear children say they want to be kites and fly planes.

I’ve learnt that Afghanistan has many children who have lost parents, not only as a result of parents killed in conflict, but also as a result of landmines. Boys who lose limbs are unable to fetch water or work, and girls are rendered disfigured and therefore unmarriageable. In either instance, medical treatment (amputation or replacement) is generally not an option, and it is often easier for families to abandon their children than to provide what will be (required) lifelong care. At this home, aides play with children, as well as create traditional handicrafts and (where possible/if they themselves can) teach literacy and vocational skills.

On the ground, peace and reconciliation initiatives connect and engage informal networks for trade among groups/tribes and provinces through things such as handicrafts, sport and calligraphy. Although some children at the home may eventually find work or other families, those affected by landmines are likely not to be so fortunate. So, orphaned children relate to peace efforts quite personally; they are keen observers of foreign troops and are familiar with feelings of anger, enmity, loss and political revenge at levels much beyond that of most Afghan children. These feelings/circumstances have made some of them particularly vulnerable to being recruited by insurgents.

One of the kids I am assigned to for handicrafts is a boy about 9 years old, who has lost part of his right leg, just above the knee. I can recognise his distinctive smile and gait from across the compound.

His name is Shamshad. He tells me his name means strong and protective pine tree. He can take on any adversity, and he likes to make slingshots and do carpentry (slingshots are a very Afghan thing). Shamshad also says slingshots are his favourite toy, and that the village elders make a bunch to sell. He asked me a while back if I knew anyone his age who liked slingshots. [Your son] came to mind, as he made a few last summer. I replied to Shamshad that I did.

Shamshad then asked me to give one of his slingshots to your boy. He said that by giving it to someone in [our country in the West], like a tree which was his namesake, his dream of peace could take root between [our country] and Afghanistan.

The slingshot is carved from Afghan pine, encrusted with white stones common to the north of Afghanistan. It’s quite lovely. Shamshad has tested it, too, to make sure its aim is true.

Shamshad is asking nothing [in return] except to know that his gift is accepted. I’d like to deliver it according to his wishes. At the age of around nine, Shamshad already knows he will never have a (traditional) family or find place in his community; his reality is that he has brought burden to his parents. Life’s a bit heavy for him that way. But this may give him a small shot at a far-off, far-reaching kind of dream. Thank you for receiving his gift.

I trust this note finds you and your family in good health and peaceful circumstance [Photo 7].

All the best and warm regards,

A. (for Shamshad)

NOTE 3: LYRICS FROM A SONG I HEARD TODAY

I heard a song playing in a cafe today that I found particularly moving. From the album Not Forgotten: Songs
NOTE 4: Postscript

In my naturalised country now, engagement and research continue, mostly from abroad, though I have taken a few short field trips back. The four female colleagues have also migrated abroad. Shamshad has since died, and there are many days when I still reflect upon his loss. And although my day-to-day projects in Kabul (when I go back) have changed, I find that in many of my work relationships – despite the staffing changes, despite the risks and tensions inherent in Afghanistan – the qualities and sincerity remain quite the same.

So, it was somewhat surprising to me, in relating some of these narratives to colleagues back at home expressing interest about my field work, that I came to feel the need to justify, or defend, some of those conversations; and further, explain gaps in how ‘we’, in the West, can lack nuance and understanding in conceptualising best ways to intervene. From some colleagues, and even friends, I received critique that the women felt too oppressed to fight for their rights, as they themselves would have fought. Other researchers found flaws with how I positioned myself and created allegiances with those who are, technically speaking, participants allied to a research project. Other academic colleagues struggled to suggest an ontological framework wherein my reflections may be relevant to present. Still others felt ideologically and politically against pursuing humanitarian intervention in any way in Afghanistan.

I felt that many people, in reading my Notes, reacted with a certain amount of emotional response, followed by a sharing of opinion in ways that seemed unhelpful and possibly misplaced. Upon reflection, I feel this in some way embodies the spirit of foreign occupation in Afghanistan. I’ve also realised that this has shaped an empathy in me with respect to how Afghans have come to fiercely resist foreign influence in their rights and their journey to self-determine.

Néanmoins/Nonetheless, I can respect that each perspective represents larger tensions in the world, and represents present-day discourse informing humanitarian intervention and peace processes. I’ve since invested the emotional and psychological residue described herein to motivate continued engagement, public literacy and support. Although I’ve long forgotten the tune of that song that moved me in that café, the circumstances underpinning each excerpt here have created both personal and professional commitments to foster a broader understanding of resilience, conceptualise trauma according to a socio-political framework, and build community amidst complexity.

Meanwhile, the backdrop of war continues.

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Previously submitted content
Excerpts from Note 1 below and most of the photos have been shared on my personal Facebook page (visible only to friends). One of the photos has been shared on my personal Twitter account.

Conflicts of interest
None, I certify that I have NO affiliation with or involvement in any organisation or entity with any financial or other interest, personally or professionally, with the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Inclusion criteria
The thoughts in this manuscript comprise my own personal, ethnographic field notes, extracted to conform with the specific CFP of this special edition of Intervention.

Approval statement
Contents of Note 1 in this manuscript have been read and approved by the women who contributed their thoughts to it, at the time of its writing and permitted to share to a wider global audience. Contents of all Notes have been anonymised to protect identities. Photos were taken by me personally and by permission as a direct result of collegial relationships shared and/or established during my work with each individual during a 2012 residency in Afghanistan, with verbal consent to present/publish in context of our relationships. The contents of this manuscript describe and represent honest work.

1Not his real name.
2Eighty-one per cent of civilian casualties in Afghanistan were children (2017 estimate: see https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/27/afghanistans-war-takes-horrific-toll-its-children.)