On September 11, 2001, Afghanistan’s media sphere was one of the sparsest in the world. Few newspapers had survived the previous half-decade of Taliban rule, during which the nation devolved into a “country without news or pictures,” according to Reporters Without Borders.¹ A single radio station, Radio Sharia, was in operation—the lone remnant of a bygone Soviet era marked by relatively sophisticated, if centrally controlled, broadcasting practices. According to the architects of the American-led invasion that would ultimately overthrow the Taliban regime, this lack of media was not only a symptom of totalitarianism but also a cause. Free media, argued President George W. Bush during a speech to the National Endowment for Democracy in 2003, was a central pillar of “successful societies” that rejected terrorism, engaged productively with the international system, and respected the rights of all people, especially women.² To “fix” Afghanistan would be, in part, to fix Afghan media.

Accordingly, America’s war on terror brought an unprecedented level of media intervention into Afghanistan. As early as November 2001, just weeks after the start of the invasion, American media consultants were in Kabul, laying the groundwork for a hybridized public-private broadcasting system that would flourish, at least numerically, in the years to come. Today, Afghanistan’s media market is as crowded as it was once barren. Countless television stations compete for viewer attention, ranging from the megalith Tolo TV, backed by the United States and co-owned by NewsCorp, to the dozens of tiny outlets owned by local politicians, businessmen, and warlords. Bolstered by both direct American investment and a local economy supported by international aid, Afghan’s media system today appears not only vibrant but in many ways progressive. Minority cultural groups

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The Cost of Business

Gender Dynamics of Media Labor in Afghanistan

Matt Sienkiewicz
and women are represented on screen in a fashion that only years ago would have seemed impossible. It is also now commonplace to find women in key production positions, a phenomenon unseen in Afghanistan in the years between the end of Soviet control and the arrival of NATO forces in 2001.

This chapter details the ways Western media intervention in Afghanistan has aimed to foster cultural and economic environments that encourage female media participation, as well as the significant costs and limitations that have come with it. Drawing upon a five-week research trip to Kabul as well as extensive documentary research and personal communications over several years, I aim to move beyond the sweeping ideological accusations of critics to understand the specific gender dynamics that have emerged in the world of Western-funded Afghan media production. In doing so, I argue that Western efforts to bolster Afghan broadcasting have resulted in a limited but identifiable success with regard to greater female participation in the mediasphere. Noting the differences in gendered media labor between the nonprofit and commercial spheres, I foreground the intersection of economics and culture that complicates these two approaches to media assistance. I argue, however, that both approaches have fostered a sense of precariousness in the lives and careers of all media workers, with particular instability affecting women.

RIGHTFUL SUSPICIONS

If any element of recent Western foreign policy ought to be eyed with suspicion, it is the unique confluence of gender rights discourse and media assistance that has occurred in Afghanistan since 2001. Although understood largely as separate issues, both relate directly to the post–September 11 moment, in which the United States desperately attempted to articulate a worldview in which military and cultural intervention in Afghanistan would offer a sense of increased American security. As early as September 20, President George W. Bush offered the American people a picture of an Afghanistan plagued by the dual cultural blind spots of patriarchy and media deficiency. Detailing the need to destroy the Taliban and its support for Al Qaeda, Bush noted that in Afghanistan “women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television.” Unable to offer much in the way of concrete objectives for America’s military intervention, Bush bolstered his moral standing by positioning the Taliban’s Afghanistan as a perfectly inverted version of America’s idealized neoliberal self-image.

Immediately, American politicians and media outlets began to construct a discourse in which foreign intervention was required both to avoid future terrorist attacks and to save Afghan women from Afghan men. In a striking example, CNN aired the BBC documentary Beneath the Veil multiple times in the months leading up to war, offering what Lynn Spigel describes as a chance for U.S. viewers “to make
easy equivocations between the kind of the oppression the women of Afghanistan faced and the loss of innocent life on American soil on September 11.”

Stabile and Kumar go farther in their analysis of American media coverage of Afghan women in the period following September 11, arguing that “women's liberation” amounted to “little more than a cynical ploy” used to “sell the war to the US public.” American media, in their analysis, offered a decidedly selective vision of Afghan history in which the Taliban played the role of the dark villain and the United States was portrayed as the white knight rushing to save Oriental damsels in distress. Effaced from this account is the uneven, hard-fought struggle of Afghan women’s groups, such as RAWA, as well as the significant women’s rights violations committed by the United States and local allies like the Northern Alliance. Most provocatively, Stabile and Kumar go on to accuse the United States of using women as a tool through which to justify “imperialist domination,” rendering the West just as guilty of erasing Afghan women’s agency as the Taliban government against which it fought.

In a book-length study of the extensive aid aimed at improving the lives of women in postinvasion Afghanistan, Lina Abirafeh argues that willful blind spots produced by Western media had a direct impact on the sorts of programs that received funding and support in the country. In particular, stereotypical images of oppressed chaddari-clad Afghan woman seem to have dominated the mindset of NGO and Western government decision makers, much as they had captivated American readers of best-selling nonfiction, such as Zoya’s Story and My Forbidden Face. Official American voices emphasized the importance of undoing the drastic restrictions on women’s liberty enforced by the Taliban beginning in 1990, with little attention paid to the diverse history of women’s experiences in Afghanistan. Abirafeh identifies an overtly “top-down” orientation to women’s rights programming, much of it embedded with a sense that Afghan women are “unable to empower themselves.” Echoing Islah Jad’s work on the “NGO-isation” of global women’s movements, Abirafeh notes that Western feminism, with its emphasis on individual, often economic rights, blinded the Western aid apparatus to the traditional strengths of the Afghan women’s movement. In this sense, the NGO world can be understood as being in line with the emphasis on free agency and mobility that marks the landscape of globalized labor markets and contributes to the sense of precariousness that plagues media workers in every subfield. Perhaps most damningly, however, Abirafeh declares that in the rush to provide them with a dramatic and politically popular salvation, the West “forgot to consult Afghan women at all.”

Scholarly accounts of Western media assistance—defined here as the provision of Western funding and training to local media workers—to Afghanistan, though sparse, are hardly kinder than the critiques of gender aid. This pattern of suspicion follows a broader critical concern with media assistance, a field that remains
steeped in the work of post-WWII modernization theorists, particularly Daniel Lerner. James Miller usefully summarizes this critique, noting that media assistance is "fundamentally about universalizing the local and assuming an unjustifiably near causal relationship between media . . . and self governance." Turning a blind eye to the idiosyncrasies of Western media and Western democracy, media assistance advocates tend to assume that the two are inherently good and fundamentally intertwined entities.

A more subtle assumption built into media assistance work is an emphasis on the individual journalist or producer as the fundamental unit of a successful mediasphere. Although money is certainly devoted to institutional capacity building in international media projects, the trend toward contract, mobile labor found throughout the American media industry inevitably affects the training that aid recipients encounter. Furthermore, as Rao and Wasserman note, this preoccupation with individualism serves as a linchpin between the economic logic of the media business and hegemonic Western understandings of media ethics, which downplay communal interests in evaluating media quality. Miller suggests that such assumptions may be exacerbated by the well-meaning individuals on the frontlines of media assistance projects in places such as Afghanistan. The Western journalists and NGO workers who enact the on-the-ground aspects of media assistance often embrace the sort of precarious labor conditions with which this volume is concerned. Moving from place to place to provide training, these individuals bring with them the sense that media work is an independent endeavor often in direct tension with geographical and financial stability. Though this ought not impugn the intentions of Western NGO workers and media trainers, it is impossible to ignore the tension that exists between the radical individualism that might encourage someone to move from a European capital to war-torn Afghanistan and the more communal goals of local institutions.

This emphasis on market-oriented, entrepreneurial media systems is fully apparent in the reality of postinvasion Afghan media. Alongside the military onslaught of late 2001 that brought down the Taliban regime in Kabul came a concerted and highly coordinated effort to supply Afghans with a new, ostensibly independent media system. In addition to commandeering the state radio system, American forces, through USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), undertook the production of a remarkably broad and diverse Afghan mediasphere. Within five years, a once broadcast-free rural Afghanistan was dotted with local radio stations surviving on a combination of foreign largesse and local advertising revenue. In addition to playing programming aimed at articulating the intentions of NATO forces and “rural transition teams,” these stations offered a mix of locally produced shows and foreign-funded public service material. Kabul quickly emerged as a true media capital, as the vacuum produced by the Taliban’s near-total elimination of broadcasting gave way to a chaotic landscape in
which outlets run by NGOs, warlords, and entrepreneurs competed for economic footholds and political influence. Security circumstances aligned with the “logic of accumulation” identified by Curtin in the development process of media capitals, bringing thousands of young aspiring professionals home to Kabul after years of exile in Iran, Pakistan, and the West. The first great success in this new environment was Arman FM, a purely commercial radio station that nonetheless received a large initial investment from USAID’s OTI. The relationship between USAID and Arman’s owners, the Australian-Afghan Mohseni brothers, would continue and grow, with the United States eventually providing over $2 million in grants to Mohseni’s Tolo TV, a commercial station that now dominates the crowded field of Afghan television through a mix of programming tilted heavily toward Western-style game shows and dramas. Perhaps predictably, in popular accounts of Afghanistan’s new mediasphere, Tolo president Saad Mohseni is positioned as the protagonist of a story that emphasizes the individual entrepreneur over the realities of communal and government cooperation that make his station possible.

The unabashedly capitalist orientation of this project has drawn the ire of numerous critics, most notably Mark J. Barker, who argues that the newly oligarchic orientation of the Afghan mediasphere confirms American desires to foster a friendly “polyarchy” in the country, as opposed to a true democracy geared toward expressing the will of the people. To Barker, such a tactic emerges from the same strategy that led to the overtly deceitful content produced by the American-run Iraq Media Network in the wake of the fall of Baghdad. In each case, he argues, the United States took the steps it deemed necessary to ensure friendly leadership in occupied spaces, always at the expense of democracy and social justice. The Mohseni family, in this telling, represents an oligarchic regime that the United States supports due to its willingness to engage fully in the system of global capitalism. The local NGO elites favored by America play a similar rule, inculcating Western conventional thinking and contributing to the production of a mediasphere that embraces the values underpinning the neoliberal order. I will not evaluate this broader claim here. It does, however, offer a useful starting point from which to inquire into the relationship between media assistance and egalitarianism at the level of gender in Afghanistan.

CASE BY CASE: WOMEN IN FOR-PROFIT TV

The post-Taliban period by no means represents the first time women held prominent positions in the Afghan mediasphere. The period of Soviet influence and control from the 1960s to 1989 brought a number of women into the field of journalism, as a select class of urban elites prospered while others across the country faced tremendous violence and persecution. Today, older Afghan media institutions, such as the state-run Kabul Times newspaper and Radio Afghanistan, employ a small
but significant number of veteran female journalists, most of whom left as refugees during the Taliban years and returned after NATO and the Northern Alliance took control of Kabul. Like all Afghan media workers of this era, however, these Soviet-trained individuals are routinely dismissed as “unprofessional” by younger figures in the field. In addition to lacking training in contemporary media technology, they also, according to multiple sources interviewed for this study, are believed to lack the audience-focused approach to production required to succeed in contemporary Afghanistan. Whereas in other environments wartime experience might be a source of cultural capital, in contemporary Afghanistan the wholesale remaking of the local media system on primarily capitalist principles has largely marginalized the older professionals whose experiences are tainted by the communist era.

The vast majority of media producers in Afghanistan, male or female, have thus emerged over the past decade, as the country moved from a single radio broadcaster to a loosely organized system in which hundreds of outlets compete for creative talent, spectrum space, and audience attention. As a result, the overwhelming majority of television producers in Afghanistan are comfortably under the age of thirty, with radio workers skewing only somewhat older. Top-rated television programs such as Tolo’s Afghan Star and On the Road, for example, are both lead-produced by men under twenty-five.

The rapid ascent of the Afghan mediasphere offers a unique set of obstacles to female participation. As was emphasized in American discourse surrounding Afghanistan in the preinvasion period, formal education for women was virtually annihilated in the country during the Taliban’s reign. Thus the desire to quickly craft a robust media system in the postwar period left little time to train and recruit young women who could balance the gender aspect of Afghan media labor. Instead, labor needs were filled largely by a combination of returning refugees from Iran and Pakistan and local men with basic educational backgrounds. As Barker points out, subsidies for new stations, both local and national, were granted overwhelmingly to politically connected, well-resourced individuals identified by Americans as entrepreneurial enough to thrive in a commercial environment. Such individuals, by local definition, had to be males able to curry favor either with urban political elites or rural community leaders with religious legitimacy. A combination of local resistance to female participation in the public sphere and foreign demands to quickly establish a commercially viable system left little opportunity for women in media during the earliest stages of Afghanistan’s reconstruction and established a system in which men currently possess a near monopoly on “experience” and “professionalism.”

However, the profit motive of Tolo TV, combined with the organization’s interest in establishing itself as capable of relating to Western supporters, has advanced the place of female producers in remarkable ways. In part, this results from the financial strength of the station, which draws upon the resources of its partner
organization Newscorp to provide expensive services such as child care and door-to-door shuttle services, which are particularly important to women working in the dangerous environment of contemporary Kabul. These benefits are, for many potential female employees, absolute necessities that are often unavailable at the smaller-scale media operations that exist throughout the city.

Tolo has also made a concerted effort to hire women as producers, particularly in the areas of family and lifestyle programming, which are associated with primarily female audiences. Tania Farzana, for example, was recruited back to Kabul, after years in the United States, to produce a local adaptation of *Sesame Street*. Numerous other women, many of whom grew up in Afghanistan during the Taliban period, have risen to similar roles as producers within the organization. However, in speaking to a dozen female producers in Kabul in the spring of 2014, I was unable to locate one who considered an Afghan, not Western, woman to be her ultimate boss.23

In my attempt to identify the most experienced female producers in Afghan commercial television, I was consistently steered toward women between the ages of twenty and twenty-three. Rokhsar Azamee ranks as one of the most experienced female producers in Afghanistan, despite having left the industry at twenty-two. Feverishly working from the age of seventeen after being introduced to Tolo management by a neighbor, Azamee produced several programs, primarily in the health and morning talk show genres. Having freelanced at a number of local stations in Kabul, Azamee enthusiastically attests to the freedom allowed women at Tolo TV as well as Ariana TV, another for-profit station. She suggests that these outlets, especially Tolo, encourage female freedom of expression by never introducing the concerns of “the government” or religious leaders into programs on sensitive topics such as health and education. This is not to say, however, that working at Tolo comes without risk. As Wazmah Osman notes in her history of postinvasion Afghan culture wars over television, women who work at Tolo, particularly on air, face precariousness in the most literal sense. A famous, tragic example is that of Shaima Rezayee, an on-air personality murdered after months of criticism from conservative cultural elements.24

Perhaps with such factors on her mind, Azamee, at an age at which her Western counterparts would have been fighting over volunteer internships at local stations, reached what she felt to be a natural conclusion to her television career. She moved into the more lucrative and stable telecommunications industry.25 This remarkable trend toward youth currently cuts across gender lines at Tolo, although trends suggest that young men are more likely to remain with the organization for the long term. Although Kabul University offers a degree in journalism, Tolo TV recruits its creative staff by casting an enormously wide net, bringing in large numbers of young people with negligible skill sets and quickly assigning them surprising levels of responsibility. Most recruits wash out quickly, while the survivors take on relatively high-ranking producing roles within months.
This system succeeds in bringing in a fair number of women alongside a much higher proportion of men. However, Tolo’s trial-by-fire approach is far better suited to the lifestyles of young Afghan men. The hours are long, sometimes bordering on abusive. In a cultural space in which women working at night and women engaging in the public sphere are both points of great controversy, this system of long hours and high stakes at young ages is particularly precarious for women. Ultimately, it is untenable for most Afghan women to continue working such hours for the pedestrian pay that even the well-funded Tolo is able to offer. There are many men willing to endure these conditions during their twenties, gaining professional experience and prestige while putting off family life and the economic exigencies that come with it. However, this is less of an option for women, many of whom wish to marry during this time period.

As a result, the Afghan for-profit mediasphere is remarkably successful in bringing women to positions of responsibility in production but is far less successful in keeping them there. In my interviews with producers at Tolo TV, the station was often described as a benevolent institution insofar as it granted expressive freedom to young women and opened doors, including opportunities at Western media organizations like the BBC. It is not, however, a stabilizing force for women wishing to gain an economic foothold in Afghanistan’s uncertain economy.

THE NONCOMMERCIAL SECTOR

As the United States supported Tolo TV in the hopes that market forces would, among other things, encourage greater female media participation, numerous smaller, nonprofit projects were put forth with this explicit goal. To a significant extent, the United States outsourced this aspect of the Afghan media sphere, building gaps into a system of small local radio stations to be filled by allied nations with projects geared specifically toward female empowerment. Although American policy papers written throughout the 2000s emphasize the importance of nonprofit, women-produced media, they also cede many logistic elements to the French and Canadian governments. This strategy makes a certain sense. America had overtly promised increased female access to the public sphere in the buildup to the war. However, once the invasion began, the realpolitik of post-Taliban Afghanistan provided ample incentive to create distance between the U.S. government and controversial media initiatives.

The most striking example of this danger is the story of Afghan Radio Peace, a single-room station broadcasting from Jabal Saraj in Parwan Province. Uniquely, the station’s origins predate September 11. In a meeting in France in March 2001, a group of French women’s rights leaders challenged Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Masoud in exactly the way Abirafeh argues postinvasion NATO forces could not challenge Afghan leaders. As the world focused on the evaporation of
women’s rights under the Taliban, French leaders pressed Masoud on his position on women in the Afghan public sphere. Putting the famed military leader on the spot, the group offered to fund a radio station in Northern Alliance territory, provided a woman be made manager. Masoud accepted and Zakia Zaki, a controversial local advocate for women’s rights, took charge of Afghan Radio Peace. The French agreed to pay for a year of Zaki’s salary, oil for an electric generator, and fifteen days of basic radio training with French broadcasting professionals.

By the time the station opened in October 2001, much had changed. Masoud was assassinated on September 10, one day before America’s invasion of Afghanistan was made inevitable. However, operating in a semiautonomous space at the mouth of the Panjshir Valley, Zaki’s small station was truly revolutionary. For six years, the station functioned on a combination of foreign money and local revenue strategies built primarily on classified-style hyperlocal advertising. As NATO and USAID took over rural radio broadcasting in Afghanistan, the French withdrew support, forcing the station to play American-funded public service programming to bring in the money necessary to remain on air. From 2005 to 2007, the station flourished under this model, airing foreign-produced material as well as a selection of local programs rarely focused specifically on women’s issues but steeped in the values that brought Zaki to anti-Taliban activism.

In 2007, however, tremendous changes took place. NGO support in Afghanistan began to falter from fatigue, and the Taliban began to reassert itself nationally, largely through increasingly daring suicide attacks. With these disruptions came a campaign specifically targeting female journalists and other public figures. On June 6, 2007, Zaki was murdered. Her death had a massive effect on both Afghan Radio Peace and female media participation throughout the country. In the years following Zaki’s assassination, little support has flowed to the station, with no foreign institution wishing to rebuild it to its previous place. Zaki’s husband, Abdul Ahad Ranjbar, has taken over what has become a quiet outlet broadcasting twelve hours a day, half of which is American-funded national programming for which the station receives a few hundred dollars to keep the gas generator running.

If there is a figure who has picked up Zaki’s mantle, it is Farida Nekzad, whose career has run the gamut of Western-supported noncommercial media in Afghanistan. Nekzad began her media career as a refugee, working in Pakistan when the Taliban controlled Kabul. Inspired by a neighbor who worked for state media during the years of Soviet control, Nekzad received an education in journalism at Kabul University, before the Taliban banned female enrollment. In Pakistan, Nekzad found work with the BBC. When she returned to Kabul in 2002, Nekzad was a rare woman with the credentials necessary for managerial-level work with Western-funded media institutions. This experience allowed her to find employment with the Institute for Media, Policy and Society (IMPACS), a branch of the Canadian government encouraged by USAID to
create three rural women-run stations in the relatively peaceful northern region of Afghanistan.

According to Sarah Kamal, a scholar who worked at the IMPACS station in Mazar I Sharif, the project fell into many of the unreflective patterns so often seen in Western approaches to women’s development. In addition to early difficulties in recruiting women to work at the station due to local cultural resistance, the outlet was plagued by a disconnect between the needs of listeners and the expectations of international organizations. Foreign funders and local religious leaders required all programming be preapproved and “pressed the radio station towards adopting a scripted and more formal radio voice over spontaneous conversational dialogue in its programming.” Ultimately, the station failed to reach its intended female audience, as Western ideas of individualism and journalistic professionalism created a growing gap between the voices on the air and those listening. However, this professionalized, Westernized understanding of how to run a radio station has had one significant side effect: it has produced numerous female journalists prepared to succeed in Westernized organizations, often at better pay. The station’s current director, Mobina Khairandish, describes the outlet’s function as much in terms of training women producers as reaching the sort of audience envisioned by IMPACS when it made the original investment in 2005. Now financially stable, though reliant on occasional contracted projects for NGOs, the station has become a training ground for local women wishing to gain a foothold in the world of media. Despite ongoing difficulties with local groups who question the appropriateness of women on the radio, recruitment issues have more or less disappeared, with small but consistent numbers of young women arriving at the station to work each year.

Although critics like Kamal question the station’s ability to truly engage with large numbers of local listeners, it is undeniable that journalists trained at the station have moved on to jobs both within Afghanistan and abroad. In a creative maneuver, the outlet has taken young women whose families discouraged them from taking on public roles and positioned them as journalistic trainers. For example, local offices of Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, an Internews-funded institution for media education, now feature alumna from the Mazar I Sharif station. Other former employees work across the globe, primarily in media assistance organizations whose goals model the idealized, arguably disconnected, approach to journalism put forth by IMPACS. Although IMPACS perhaps failed in its attempt to train producers capable of connecting to a local audience, it succeeded in training Afghan women for a world of precarious labor in the overlapping fields of media production and media assistance. A project originally intended to suture community bonds may ultimately serve as a training ground for individuals entering an era of transitory and inconsistent labor conditions.
Farida Nekzad became the IMPACS project’s greatest local success, leveraging her time with the Canadian organization to procure a position as the codirector of Pajhwok News. Set up as an independent NGO, Pajhwok—funded by Internews (and thus USAID) and based in Kabul—serves as the main domestic wire service in Afghanistan. While at Pajhwok, Nekzad oversaw tremendous changes in Kabul’s journalistic landscape, particularly with regard to women. As universities began producing the first generation of post-Taliban journalism graduates, a number of women sought work at organizations like Pajhwok.

Nekzad, in a unique position of power, made a number of policy changes that have had a significant impact. Most obviously, she instituted a hiring quota for women, arguing that the increase in female journalism graduates required a change on the part of the organization. Remarkably, for a brief period in 2006, Pajhwok employed more female than male journalists. More subtly, Nekzad fundamentally changed local newsroom culture, temporarily suspending the traditional practice of separating men and women at company lunches. In Nekzad’s view, lunchtime gender segregation, which remains prevalent throughout Afghan business, government, and NGO culture, represented a significant stumbling block to gender equality. “They make big decisions over lunch,” she notes. “People think that men are funny and women are quiet because they are in the other room.”

The ugly events of 2007, however, forever changed Nekzad’s career and undid a number of the changes she had instituted. After Zaki’s death, Nekzad began to receive increasingly violent threats, followed by multiple attempts on her life. Women no longer applied for positions at Pajhwok at the same rate, for fear of reprisals. When Nekzad became pregnant, she quit the organization for America to safely raise her child. Upon returning in 2010, she found a very different landscape. Pajhwok was once again dominated by men, with lunches resegregated and only men in managerial positions.

In response, she took over a fledging competitor, Wakht News. Housed in a three-room apartment off of a main street in Kabul, Wakht currently operates a frequently updated web site that is routinely cited by mainstream Afghan media. Nekzad has attempted to restaff the organization with women but has found the task nearly impossible. As Western NGOs have fled Kabul over the past five years, little grant money is available for anything but well-established, typically male-dominated institutions. As a result, Nekzad was forced to pare back her budget. Although women can sometimes be hired for lower salaries, their presence adds to a company’s expenses. While traveling in the city is dangerous to anyone, men are able to ride public transportation and hire taxis when they are unable to walk. For women, this is too dangerous, adding significant private transportation costs to employer budgets. Nekzad’s new organization thus faces a familiar conundrum in public service Afghan media. Those organizations that are big enough to maintain a large, diverse staff are deeply entrenched in traditional modes of office culture.
that work to the disadvantage of female workers. Those that might be willing to challenge these norms, however, are unlikely to receive enough funding to successfully hire women, given the significant additional expense.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the popularity of the Afghan women’s cause in the period following September 11, Lila Abu-Lughod notes the deeply troubling parallels between the American rhetoric of the time and the colonial era discourse of “saving Muslim women.” The American government, media, and seemingly much of the population understood the plight of women under Taliban rule in terms that were both culturally reductive and historically myopic. Generalizations about Muslim and Afghan women abounded, while reflections on the role of the West in shaping Afghan history were all but absent. The American-led war effort was praised for freeing Afghan women from the Taliban but rarely critiqued for assuming that all people ought to pursue Western, neoliberal visions of individual agency and free expression.

It is both easy and entirely appropriate to set American media assistance efforts in Afghanistan within this context. Although efforts were made to incorporate local voices in the new Afghan media system, this system was nonetheless built upon presumptions of the superiority and universality of Westernized media systems. Whenever possible, wealthy entrepreneurs were afforded benefits. When for-profit media was not suitable, America and its allies employed an NGO model that David Harvey found to be deeply intertwined with the neoliberal state system, often emphasizing individual rights over community needs. Both of these approaches appealed to the notion of “saving” women critiqued by Abu-Lughod, in the former case through the magic of the profit motive, in the latter via the largesse of Western cosmopolitanism.

In this chapter I have strived to move beyond the simple neoliberal critique, attempting to consider more closely the specific, concrete impact of American policies on the work of female Afghan media workers. It would be foolish and dishonest to deny that the American-imposed system of media that currently dominates Afghanistan has brought hundreds of women into the public sphere in ways previously impossible. In the nonprofit realm, rare, privileged, and remarkably determined individuals like Farida Nekzad have succeeded in using small openings imposed by the West to create new opportunities for female voices. Furthermore, in considering the words and experiences of women working in the field, it is apparent that, given the circumstances, the profit-oriented media systems decried by Barker do, in fact, offer a greater range of expression to women. Although the Afghan government attempts to exert control over all media, the economic might and global cachet of Tolo TV have allowed the station to push boundaries, thus providing greater autonomy for producers like Rokhsar Azamee.
And yet it is necessary to note that, despite the rhetoric of security and nation building surrounding American media efforts in Afghanistan, increased female expression has by no means removed the precariousness of Afghan labor. In some cases, it has actively encouraged new elements of uncertainty, particularly for women. Most obviously, violence, death threats, and terror still plague the lives of female producers, although this situation predates the immediate post-2001 American involvement in the region. More subtly, both NGO media initiatives and for-profit businesses place women in disproportionately precarious circumstances. Although NGOs train and hire women at admirably high rates, their funding is fickle, with donors often falling away over time. As seen in the case of Nekzad’s Wakht News, women are often the first to lose their jobs.

In the realm of commercial outlets, such as Tolo TV, female producers are valued as a short-term means to attract women viewers and positive global press. Perhaps, over time, economics will encourage the outlet to offer long-term stability to the most successful female producers. However, given Afghan economy’s remarkable instability and foreign dependence, this seems unlikely. Women will likely continue to leave for more lucrative, stable, and culturally acceptable positions, leaving most of the prestigious yet highly taxing production jobs to the men. Yes, Afghan women now have access to jobs that did not exist fifteen years ago and would never have been open to females even if they had. However, these new opportunities have combined the precariousness of war and reconstruction with the sorts of precariousness described throughout this volume in even the calmest mediaspheres.

NOTES


6. Ibid., 773.


13. Ibid., 16.
23. This is not to say that such a person might not exist. However, the trend of young women serving as producers under slightly less young males was remarkable in its consistency during my Skype and Facebook interviews.
25. Rokhsar Azamee, personal communication, June 2013
26. I realize this is a serious accusation, but I firmly believe it to be the case. In my discussions, multiple young male producers, whom I will not name in this context, attested to working shifts lasting over twenty-four hours. To them, these tasks seemed more or less akin to that of a college student pulling an all-nighter—stories recounted with nostalgia but nonetheless indicative of labor exploitation.
27. A lead producer of multiple high-rating Tolo shows might make as little as $1,200/month in a city that suffers from considerable housing and food inflation.
30. Abdul Ahad Ranjbar, personal communication, June 2013.
31. Ibid., 408.
32. Ibid., 409.
33. Mobina Khairandish, personal communication, June 2013.
34. Farida Nekzad, personal communication, June 2013.
36. Ibid., 784.
38. Which is not to say, however, that America did not play a role in bringing Afghanistan to the state it is currently in.